

Recovery Assessment Scale – Domains & Stages

RAS-DS

WORKBOOK

Version One

Module Four: Connecting and Belonging

A FREE resource to support you in
driving your own mental health recovery



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY



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~READ THIS FIRST~

Mental health recovery doesn't require reading textbooks full of medical mumbo-jumbo, or placing all your hope in a psychiatrist. In fact, one of the richest sources of knowledge on the subject is other people who have already experienced the same struggles and obstacles. Sure, learning how to wrangle a mental illness so it doesn't interfere with your life may take time and effort, but you are undoubtedly the best person for the job. Simply **wanting** to recover will make all the difference. If you choose to get in the driver's seat and take control, this workbook will be able to help you on your journey.

This workbook assumes only two things:

1. That you are on a mental health recovery journey
2. That you've already filled in the RAS-DS (Recovery Assessment Scale Domains and Stages) questionnaire

Depending on your scores in the questionnaire, some modules in this workbook may be more or less relevant for you at this moment. In order to keep things simple, this workbook has been divided into the same four sections as the RAS-DS. It's worth noting at this point that you don't need to read this entire workbook, or do it in order, either. For example, you may already have an awesome support network, meaning that **Connecting and Belonging** may not be all that relevant to you at this time, but perhaps you've decided that you want to find out how to add more meaning to your life by checking out **Doing Things I Value**. No problem!

NOTE

We'd like to be clear about some basic language issues. You'll find that the workbook will often use terms like "mental illness" or "mental health issues" or "conditions". Depending on your preferences you could easily read them as "your response to trauma" or "difficulties" or whatever else you prefer. We hope the material in this workbook will be relevant in a wide range of situations, whatever language you choose to use.

Four modules, many tools

This workbook is divided into the same four sections as the RAS-DS questionnaire. Here's a brief overview.

Module One: Doing Things I Value

Want to live a satisfying life full of meaning and value? Great! This is the module for you. Because the way we spend our time is critical to our well-being, it's essential that we do things that bring purpose, good health, pleasure, fun and balance to our lives. Doing Things I Value focuses on doing things you value and enjoy, and adding healthy and constructive elements to your routine.

Module Two: Looking Forward

Are you feeling hopeful about your recovery? Do you understand that a mental health issue does not define you? This module can help you to develop the skills and attitudes you will need to play an active role in your own recovery and plan effectively for your future well-being.

Module Three: Mastering my Illness

Understanding how to manage our mental health issues is key to living the life we want. This module doesn't just help you to understand and manage your illness, but to MASTER it. It will help you to become the world's greatest expert in YOU!

Module Four: Connecting and Belonging

We all need people we can trust and depend on. While having the support of mental health workers is important, it's best if they don't make up our entire support network. This module focuses on building friendships, forming community connections, and nurturing the relationships that are most helpful to you.

Why are there so many different boxes?

Here are the different kinds of inserts you'll be dealing with, and a description.

NOTE

We provide all sorts of useful hints in these boxes (like the one about language on the first page of READ THIS FIRST, for instance).

This connects to...

These boxes will connect up the four modules along similar points. Following these suggested links can help you make the most of this workbook.

"Boxes like this will contain quotes from various sources, such as people with a lived experience, famous mental health experts, or other public figures."

-Grant (co-author of this workbook, and an experienced mental health consumer)

● Exercise

Filling in some simple, practical exercises is a great way to take what you've read in this workbook and apply it to your own life. Each exercise is explained in laymen's terms, and we'll often provide clear examples, too.

About the authors

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Hi guys! My name is Grant, and I've been riding the rollercoaster of mental illness since my tweens. I've spent well over a third of my life in institutions because of schizophrenia, depression and anxiety, and I still have to manage some symptoms to this day. Although I'm not totally free of my illness, I have reached a point where I feel my life is full of meaning and value. It's taken a struggle to reach where I am now, but thanks to some great people who have believed in me and supported me through the darkest of times, I've mastered my illness. I sincerely hope this workbook helps you to feel the same.

I've written two comedy novels about the Australian mental health system under the penname of **Dennis J Pale**, and my ultimate dream is to become a professional author. If you go to www.amazon.com.au and search for "dennis j pale" there are free samples of both books, and the kindle versions only cost a fiver! You can contact me at dennisjpale@gmail.com if you have any questions.

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We are the RAS-DS development team and occupational therapy academics at the University of Sydney. As occupational therapists, our clinical and research interests are in the area of mental health and recovery. As a team, we are committed to enhancing resources and opportunities for consumers to drive their own recovery and to work from a co-production paradigm in our research.



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Module Four:

Connecting & Belonging

MODULE FOUR: CONNECTING AND BELONGING

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to module four, *Connecting and Belonging*. Humans are social creatures, so connecting with other people is critical for our well-being. Not only is a sense of belonging a basic human need, it's particularly important for those of us on a recovery journey. Just as we wouldn't climb Mount Everest without a back-up crew, we shouldn't face our recovery journeys alone, either. After all, our supplies will be much easier to carry when we're not dragging them on our own. Of course, relationships are a two-way thing, so connecting and belonging also means supporting others in *their* journeys. We focus on four things in this module:

People who believe in me and people I trust

We all deserve to have people we can count on, people who will believe in us through the tough times. This section will help you to think about your existing relationships and how to make sure they're meeting your needs.

My social network

Identifying our support people and figuring out their different roles is really helpful in making sure we have access to the right kind of support. In everyone's life, a variety of people will take on a variety of roles.

Giving back

While it's clearly important to *receive* support from our social networks, it's also important to be able to *offer* support in return. Having a mental illness means that life has automatically qualified us to better understand the struggles of people with a lived experience, so at some point you may have an opportunity to support others in the same way you once required support. Not only is this helpful for whoever we're helping out, but it's amazing for our own feelings of purpose and meaning, too.

Tweaking, trimming and tolerating

Most of us have some relationships that are less than ideal. This section will help you think about how to "trim" those that undermine us, "tweak" those that can be improved, and "tolerate" those that can't be changed.

NOTE

If you're doing this module then we assume that you have filled in the *Connecting and Belonging* part of the RAS-DS and that you have read the READ THIS FIRST section at the start of the workbook. If you haven't, we suggest that you do that before you continue any further.

Roadmap to Connecting and Belonging

One way to do this module is to simply start at the beginning and continue to the end. However, if you have something specific in mind that you'd like to focus on, here's a quick guide to where each of the RAS-DS questions are addressed.

RAS-DS statement	Section/s in this Module
32. I have people who I can count on	Part One: <i>People who believe in me and people I trust</i> Part Two: <i>My social network</i> Part Four: <i>Trimming, Tweaking and Tolerating</i>
33. Even when I don't believe in myself, other people do	Part One: <i>People who believe in me and people I trust</i> Part Three: <i>Giving back</i>
34. It is important to have a variety of friends	Part Two: <i>My social network</i> Part Three: <i>Giving back</i>
35. I have friends who have also experienced mental illness	Part Two: <i>My social network</i> Part Three: <i>Giving back</i>
36. I have friends without mental illness	Part Two: <i>My social network</i> Part Three: <i>Giving back</i>
37. I have friends who can depend on me	Part Three: <i>Giving back</i>
38. I feel OK about my family situation	Part Four: <i>Trimming, Tweaking and Tolerating</i>

PART ONE: PEOPLE WHO BELIEVE IN ME AND PEOPLE I TRUST

The value of having people who believe in us

When people believe in us, it helps us to believe in ourselves, especially when times are tough. These people are like our own personal cheerleading squad. They don't have to worship the ground we walk on, but they must be positive, support us through our tough times, encourage us to keep going, and celebrate all our successes both small and large. We all need these kinds of people in our lives if we want to recover and achieve our goals and dreams.

We want you to think about the people you know, especially the ones you've had in your life for a long time, and try and figure out who *really* believes in you. This might mean they've played a major role in making you who you are today, encouraged you, believed you would get better again even when things were tough, or helped you to focus on your strengths and abilities. These are the sorts of people we WANT and NEED to be around.

They could be:

- a parent, sibling, a grandparent, cousin, aunty or uncle
- an old school teacher
- a lifelong friend
- somebody you know from church, a sport, a shared interest or a hobby group
- a mental health worker

● Exercise: My cheerleaders

Have you got anybody who cheers you on like this? Write them in the box below.

Who do I trust, and why?

When somebody believes in us and actively encourages our recovery, they will do things like ask if we're okay, offer reassurance, give some well-deserved praise for our milestones, and just simply be there for us. However, for them to be people we really trust, this support needs to be balanced by honesty, and perhaps even by some well-deserved (but helpful!) criticism from time to time. A true and trustworthy friend doesn't always tell us what we want to hear, but what we *need* to hear, and this honesty makes somebody more deserving of our trust. It's all about their intent, and about whether the person really has our best interests at heart. These people are more than cheerleaders. They are like our coaches: people who encourage and support us, but also challenge us and help us to improve ourselves and to be the best we can be.

Some of the ways people might earn our trust include:

- Listening to us
- Giving us their honest opinion if we ask for it
- Treating us the same way they treat their other friends
- Visiting or calling when we're in hospital
- Supporting us to do all those things that keep us well
- Asking "Are you OK?" if they notice anything out of the ordinary
- Watching for our early warning signs

"To be trusted is a greater compliment than being loved."

-George MacDonald (pioneering fantasy author and mentor of fellow writer Lewis Carroll)

● Exercise: My coaches

Think about some of the people who you trust. Place their names in the left column of the table below. Now, go through the columns and mark whatever boxes these trustworthy people tick. The more boxes any given person ticks, the more trust they've earned, and the closer you should hold them.

Name of person I trust	I trust them because they...				
	really listen to me	give me their honest opinion	make time for me	ask if I'm doing okay	Other reasons

This connects to...

Do you want to involve the people you trust in your relapse prevention plan? Go to page 31 to 38 of **Module Three: Mastering my Illness**.

Couldn't think of anyone?

If you couldn't come up with anybody who believes in you or who you trust and rely on, then read on. Part Two will give you some suggestions for increasing your social network, and Part Four will help you to make your existing social network more supportive.

PART TWO: MY SOCIAL NETWORK

We all need friends

Not everyone in our lives has to be our coaches and cheerleaders. There's room in our lives for a whole variety of people.

The tough reality is that many of us may have lost friends (and even family members) because of the effects of mental illness, the stigma attached to it, and others' lack of understanding.

Mental illness can make forming new friendships more difficult, too, as it's tough to make new friends when we're in the middle of a really tough episode in life. Lots of people living with a mental illness feel as though they don't have enough friendships or social connections.

But we don't need to just accept being isolated or lonely. Plenty of other people out there are also looking for connection and belonging – so we might be just the person to bring it to them!

First, really think about your existing friends. They don't have to be super-close to you – just people whose company you enjoy. You might find you have more than you thought.

"Never give up on someone with a mental illness. When "I" is replaced by "WE", ILLNESS becomes WELLNESS.

-Shannon L Alder (author of several books and over 1,200 inspirational quotes)

"One of the most beautiful qualities of true friendship is to understand and to be understood."

-Lucius Annaeus Seneca (ancient Roman philosopher)

● Exercise: My mates

Write down everyone you consider to be your friend. Work friends, old school friends who have stuck by you, next door neighbours, people you've joined for coffee, all of them!

Variety is the spice of life

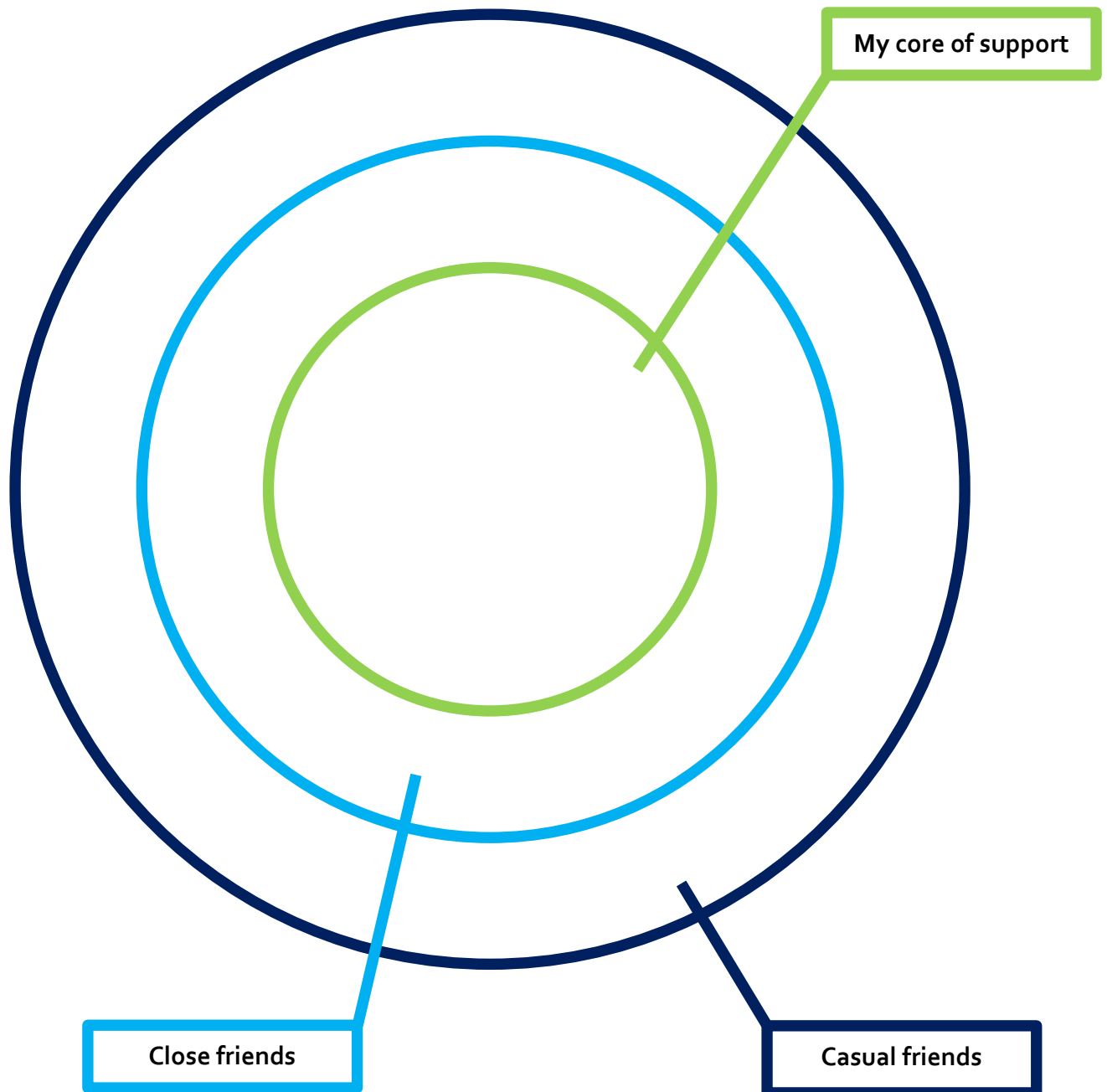
We all need a **variety** of friendships. First off, we all need a **core** of support. These are people we can rely on to help us no matter what - the sort of mates who we could wake up at 3 in the morning if we really needed to! These people will also often be those we see as our "coaches". We also need other close friends (even though we probably wouldn't wake them up in the middle of the night), the sort who we can share our thoughts, dreams and worries with. Some of these people will also be our "cheerleaders".

The third type of friends are the "casual" ones, the sort you enjoy being around and doing things with, and who will often share some common interests. These are the friends who you wouldn't necessarily share your personal stuff with. Generally, any new friends will start as "casual friends", but over time they might become closer to us until they are "close friends", or maybe even "core of support" friends.

We'd like you to think about whether you have a good mix of these types of friends, and some activities on the next couple of pages will help you to do this.

● Exercise: My network of friends

Knowing how important it is to have a mixture of friends, the following exercise will help you really figure out your personal network. Look at the list of all your friends and think about what sort of friends they are. Are they your core of support, your close friends or your casual friends? Write down their names in the target below.



● Exercise: Friends with and without an experience of mental illness

Now that you've filled in the circles, have a good look at your work and think about the balance. Do you feel like you have enough people in each ring? Is there a type of friendship that you need more of? If you would like to build your network of friends there are some great suggestions in the next few sections that might be useful.

Another way to look at your friendship mix is to see if you have mates with and without an experience of mental illness. People have told us that being friends with somebody with a mental illness (a fellow traveller) is different to being friends with somebody who *doesn't* have that sort of shared experience. It's not a matter of somebody being better or worse due to this one factor, but having friends on both sides of the line is really important in many different ways.

Now, go back to the circles of friendships on the previous page. Circle the mates who have a mental illness of some kind. Once you've done that, have a good look at the balance between the number of your friends who HAVE a lived experience compared to those WITHOUT a lived experience. How do you feel about the way they're balanced? Would you prefer to develop more friends in one of these particular groups? If you want to work on developing more friendships in either group, keep reading for some thoughts and suggestions.

Making more "fellow traveller" friends

So why is it important to have friends WITH a mental illness? Firstly, many of us will tend to hide our mental health histories from new people, as we may fear they'll be weirded out, or perhaps even avoid us altogether. So while we may be reluctant to discuss this stuff with people we don't know all that well, having friends with a similar condition can provide a great opportunity to explore the realities of illness without having to censor ourselves (you could think of it as "sharing notes," if you'd like). People often feel at their most open and honest when they are with friends who are "fellow travellers," which is one term for people who have their own experiences with mental illness. Having these friends helps us feel understood. While we shouldn't expect a friend to fulfill the role of "therapist" in a relationship, having mutual experiences means there's a lot we can share: the usefulness of different medications, experiences with side effects, what strategies or services we find most helpful when things get tough, or even just discussing which hospital dinners were the

worst ones of all! A shared experience also qualifies these friends to better understand what we're going through when we are having a rough time. Of course, the risk of encountering stigma from such friends is much less likely.

Of course, if you're inviting a friend with a lived experience into your support network, they may ask YOU to be a part of THEIR network, too!

It kinda goes without saying that there are people living with a mental illness everywhere we go! At some places though, they will be easier to find and connect with! Here are a few good places where you might meet other people with their own experience with mental illness.

- Drop-in centres or local community centres
- Group programs run by local mental health services or local community organisations
- While you are waiting for appointments
- Peer support groups
- Friends-of-friends
- Hospital
- On-line mental health support groups

Friends **WITHOUT** a mental illness

Even though having "fellow traveller" friends is really helpful, having friends who **don't** have an experience of mental illness can be a positive sign that we are "getting back out there" and re-connecting with our community. All of us have lots to offer potential new friends, and it's not good to be "cut off" from other people for too long.

Depending on where we meet people, it can be surprising just how understanding the average Joe or Jill can really be. And with mental illness affecting one in five people, it's likely that we won't be the first person with lived experience they've met. Having said that, if our medical stuff doesn't directly affect another person, then it's up to us whether and when we want to share. Nobody is expected to share everything about themselves with people they have just met. Just like there's no need to immediately tell them about our pet budgie, our preference for dark chocolate or our enjoyment of Rick Astley records.

When we are seeking to make friends with people who don't have a lived experience, it's a good idea to look for people who share something else with us. For example, there isn't much point going to a Greek Orthodox Church if you don't have an interest in that religion, or to a football game if you hate sport!

Listed below are just a few ideas of where you might start connecting with new people who are not necessarily "fellow travellers," but that doesn't mean somebody with a lived experience wouldn't go to these places, too!

- Places of worship
- Local events (check your local community centre and local papers)
- Sport events
- Clubs or groups related to your interests or hobbies you have
- Work
- Places you study
- Friends-of-friends
- And the list goes on...

This connects to Module One: Doing Things | Value

If we want to meet new people, then one of the best ways to do this is to connect up with activities that we enjoy. This will involve interacting with a range of new people who enjoy the same things as us, and can be the best of foundations for a new friendship.

But striking up new friendships just isn't that easy!

Some people are natural extroverts. They can talk to anyone, anywhere, anytime. Others are the exact opposite. And feeling stigmatised by mental illness, or having been burnt by previous relationships, can really knock your confidence in starting new friendships. So making new friends isn't always as easy as just turning up at places where other people hang out. Approaching and talking to people for the first time can take a lot of courage. Here are some tips for when it's not easy.

- Get involved in activities (see Module One for ideas). Doing activities alongside other people not only brings you together with people with similar interests, but because the focus is on the activity, you're not put on the spot to come up with sparkling conversation from the very first moment.
- Try to smile and look open, interested and friendly. This will make other people more likely to approach you.
- Practice striking up brief conversations with people around you. For example, if you see someone walking their dog at the park, tell them how cute the dog is (dog owners love this) and ask what kind it is. Or ask the check-out girl how her day has been. When you walk away, give yourself a pat on the back for making that effort. If you do this sort of thing regularly, it'll get easier and easier.
- Find something in the environment or about the person that you can comment on or ask a question about. For example, "Where did you get those great shoes?" (everyone loves a compliment) or "It's clouding over, I wonder if it's going to rain?"
- Ask questions that invite a story, like "how do you know (mutual friend)?"
- Really listen to what people tell you, and encourage them to tell you more. Many people love to talk and everyone loves a good listener.
- If you find socialising exhausting, be sure to plan it in small doses, with time alone to recharge afterward.
- Make use of social media. Sending someone a Facebook friend request or following them on Instagram can be a good, non-threatening way to get to know each other a bit.

- Instead of concentrating on how you appear to others or how uncomfortable you feel, think about how to make other people feel good. For example, you might smile at them, give them a compliment ("great t-shirt!"), or offer to give them a hand carrying their stroller up the stairs. This can help you feel less self-conscious.
- If you've met someone that you seem to get along with and would like to become friends with, invite them out. For the first time, doing something relatively brief and casual is good, like coffee somewhere local or maybe going to see a band you know they like. This step can be really hard, because there's always the possibility they'll say no. But it's critical if you want the relationship to move beyond "acquaintance" and toward "friend".
- Remember that other people have their own concerns, and are therefore unlikely to be judging your social skills. A little social awkwardness on your part is unlikely to even be noticed.
- Not all social interactions will go as planned. Sometimes you might approach someone who doesn't want to start a conversation or be friends. This happens to everyone, so don't give yourself a hard time about it. It will often be more about what's going on for them rather than about you.
- Remember that feeling shy or awkward amongst strangers doesn't make you a less valuable friend. Those of us who don't make friends easily tend to make *excellent* friends because we choose well and really value the ones we have.

PART THREE: GIVING BACK

We all need to be needed

All of us have a natural drive to contribute to the world around us in our own way. Psychologically, we need to feel needed. But perhaps you don't feel like there are other people who need you or depend on you? If so, turning this situation around is an important part of any mental health recovery. No matter who you are, you have plenty to offer the world, especially to the people you already know and care about.

It can be tough for us to give our time, effort and energy to other people when we have so much going on in our own head, but as we grow and recover, we'll eventually reach the stage where we are ready to be an active part of other people's support networks and to give back to our local community.

Being a person who supports and helps others is a big indicator of recovery for a lot of people. So...how do we start this process?

Giving back to your friends (or family)

The way we help others doesn't have to be massive. We don't have to donate a kidney to be making an impact. In fact, some ways we can help others don't take much effort at all. Simple acts like listening and offering some genuine encouragement when a friend is struggling can have a profound effect. And we don't need to offer pie-in-the-sky optimism, like telling someone they'll be the next DaVinci or DiCaprio! Just standing by somebody as they go through life's challenges (and not ditching them at the first speed bump) can be a precious thing. The best place we can have an impact is within our own circle of friends and family. You might want to conquer the lounge room before trying to take on the world!

Simple ways to help our friends can include:

- Calling them or texting them if we haven't heard from them in a while
- Providing practical assistance like going along with someone to a new activity as "moral support" or helping out with the housework or the gardening
- Meeting up with them when and where you promised

- Reminding them things will get better in time
- Encouraging them to give their new medication a chance
- Telling them that they are capable of a lot more than they may believe
- Sharing your experiences of what helped you in a similar situation
- Organizing get-togethers
- Connecting friends with other friends
- Asking them to tell you about what's bothering them, or just about their day
- Being a great listener

What we do for the people around us doesn't have to be the same as anybody else. This difference is a good thing, as each person needs many different things, and no single person could possibly provide all of it. Our contributions might be drops going into an ocean, but each drop matters and we don't need to do huge things to make a splash in someone else's life!

There are many ways that we can help others. "Giving back" to our friends and the wider community can have a very powerful impact on how we see ourselves, so it's highly recommended.

A suggestion from Grant:

Try being the glue

Got a bunch of friends who you think would hit it off? Know a couple of people who might like to increase their social networks? Perhaps you could plan a group activity! Coffee at a local café is a good, easy, cheap option, and so is lunch or dinner somewhere affordable (firstly, be sure to check that the restaurant does split bills if you want to save drama). Larger scale plans will require more time and effort, but they are easier than they sound if you take it one detail at a time. If everyone is strapped for cash, then watching a movie at someone's house and cooking dinner together is a better option. When you meet up, make sure you introduce everybody, and be sure to have fun! It might sound like a lot of effort, but it's a truly wonderful experience to see a big group of people enjoying themselves, especially if you were the one who connected them all together.

Who might benefit from your support?

So what practical support can we offer to other people? This could be doing almost anything for almost anyone, and can be as involved as you like. Here are a few examples of practical things that any of us can do for the people around us.

- Inviting a lonely friend (or potential friend) out to coffee
- Helping people who are worse off by working at a charity shop or soup kitchen
- Calling a friend while they're in hospital
- Offering to do the grocery shopping for a sick friend or neighbour
- Listening to a friend who's struggling with depression
- Carrying groceries for your ninety-seven-year-old neighbour
- Babysitting your mate's kids

● Exercise: Who do I already help?

Ask yourself: Who do I already help out? Who already depends on me? How do they depend on me?

Friend/person	How I help/support them

● Exercise: Who else could I offer assistance to?

Can you identify somebody else who's in need who may appreciate your help? How could you help them?

Friend/person	What could I do to help/support them

This connects to...

Module One: Doing Things I Value. In particular, **Part Two: Doing things that are meaningful** goes into a lot more depth about making plans to do things that contribute to or help other people.

"Lots of people want to ride with you in the limo, but what you want is someone who will take the bus with you when the limo breaks down."

-Oprah Winfrey

PART FOUR: TRIMMING, TWEAKING AND TOLERATING

Dealing with difficult relationships

Some relationships are like a great home-cooked meal – healthy, enjoyable and satisfying. Others are like a pizza without cheese – still pretty good, but could definitely be improved. Still others are like bad fast food – they leave you feeling a bit queasy. If you have difficulty or feel uncomfortable in a relationship, or can see that it is not good for your well-being, you can either trim it (end the relationships or reduce its impact), tweak it (make changes to the relationship to make it better), or tolerate it (learn to live with it in a way that doesn't harm you).

Trimming: Are there “friendships” you need to end?

We've talked about people who believe in us and people we trust. Now we need to think about the other side of the coin – are there people who we don't trust, and who are unhelpful to us and our recovery journey? Even if we like somebody or enjoy their company, we still need to think about whether those relationships are healthy and helpful. It makes life so much easier if the people in our circles are supportive of our wellness, or at the very least aren't a destructive influence. As we've said, we all deserve friends we can count on, friends who build us up, not people who tear us down and make life more of a struggle.

Some examples of how people can tear us down include:

- Pushing you to take substances that you've told them are bad for you
- Calling you offensive names like crazy, lunatic, schizo, mental, that sort of thing
- Touching you or doing things to you that you don't like
- Physically hurting you
- Teasing you or making fun of you
- Encouraging you to stop taking medications that you know are helpful
- Always asking you for money or other things
- Treating you like you're dangerous
- Treating you like you're stupid
- Sharing your private stuff with other people without your permission

We don't need people like this in our lives. The people we spend time with should make our lives richer and happier, not worse! If somebody wants to continue being a turkey, then you have the right to leave them behind and hang out with somebody better.

If you are wondering about whether you might be better off without certain people, perhaps the exercise on the next page can help?

● Exercise: What won't I accept from "friends"?

We all need to set boundaries that people are not allowed to cross. If people don't respect your boundaries, then they aren't respecting you. If they don't respect you, then they aren't your friend.

You are the gatekeeper when it comes to the influence that other people have over you. After all, if you don't want to associate with somebody, it's your right to make that choice. If somebody in your life is dragging you down, making life hard and generally not fitting the definition of a friend, then are they really somebody you want to spend your precious time with? It's good to know where you draw the line on what you will not tolerate from other people. Write down the things that are not okay for friends to do in this box. Our list above might help you get started.

"There is nothing wrong with avoiding people who hurt you."

-Taylor Swift (mega-successful musician)

"Life is too short to spend with people who suck the happiness out of you."

-Anonymous

Things I don't tolerate...

Hopefully you can now look at these things and think about whether there are people in your life that you might want to leave behind. It's not always easy to ditch people, especially if they are in your life because you are involved in the same things or activities. If you are struggling with how to get them out of your life, we suggest you sit down and talk to a person you trust and develop a plan together.

Tweaking: Changing aspects of my relationships

Some relationships can be mostly good, but a particular aspect might bother us. Of course, no relationship is perfect, and we all have to put up with other people's foibles, but some things, like those you identified above, just don't seem right. In the same way, sometimes our friends and family try to support us in ways that actually aren't the best for us. We can choose to just go along with these things, but then the situation will continue to bother and stress us out. Our support people will never know how they could be supporting us better if we don't say something.

The alternative is to do something to shape your relationships and the support you get. Say you have a good friend who you enjoy being with, but they occasionally make jokes about your mental illness, which embarrasses and upsets you. If you pretend not to notice and laugh along, they will understandably think you don't mind. So ask yourself a question: if they knew they were upsetting you, would they care? If the answer is no, perhaps they fall into the "trimming" category. If the answer is yes, then perhaps some "tweaking" on your part is needed. Say your mum is a great support to you, but she phones you all the time when you're out with your friends and it drives you crazy. Again, some tweaking might be needed.

There are lots of different ways that people living with mental illness shape the support they get. Some of these are pretty ambiguous. For example, we might give non-verbal signals that we're not happy with the way things are going, for example, by going quiet, acting grumpy or even avoiding the person. The person might correctly interpret these things, but then again they may just think we're having a bad day.

In general, if you want something to change, it's best to communicate this openly and assertively. Assertive communication means telling the person what you need clearly, but respectfully and with consideration for their feelings and needs as well.

Tips for communicating assertively include:

- Choose a time when you are both calm and on good terms
- Acknowledge that you value the person and the relationship
- Say what you would like to change about your relationship clearly and honestly (for example, "I would like you not to ask me to lend you money anymore")
- Keep your voice at a normal volume and confident tone – not aggressive, but not apologetic either
- Make eye contact and keep a calm expression
- State the facts. Don't exaggerate or use words like "never" or "always" (for example, "you never pay it back")
- Use "I" statements, like "I feel uncomfortable and pressured when you do that"
- Listen respectfully to the other person's point of view. Be prepared to compromise, but make sure it's in a way you're truly happy with - don't cave in

Sometimes we might feel reluctant to suggest ways that our support people can better support us; maybe we feel ungrateful or are concerned about hurting their feelings or worrying them. Maybe we're not used to talking about our feelings, or have trouble finding the right words to explain things. Maybe we think they won't understand or it won't make a difference or maybe we just haven't thought about trying to change things. A lot of these things can be overcome by thinking carefully about how to approach them in a kind and respectful way. Talk to someone you trust about how to do this. If it's something that might seriously affect your recovery and the person is a close family member, you might even consider including them in a conversation with your mental health worker. A trusted mental health worker who understands the situation may be able to help you to get your point across clearly and unemotionally.

Tolerating: When you can't change things

Some relationships cannot be changed and cannot be erased from your life either. In particular, relationships with family members can fit into this category. As the final part of Connecting and Belonging, we think it's really important to talk about these relationships.

Family members have a critical impact on people with lived experience of mental illness. For many of us, family are our "core of support" – the people we can trust and rely on throughout our recovery journey.

However, our family members also have the power to hurt us far worse than anybody else in our lives. Sadly, some people haven't been supported by their families, and may have even been betrayed or harmed by a family member or somebody else who was very close to them, whether verbally, physically, emotionally or sexually. The people who have unhelpful (and sometimes harmful) family relationships have all told us the same thing: even if they cannot forgive certain family members, they needed to reach a point where they were able to stop allowing the hatred and anger they felt from getting in the way of their recovery and their future happiness. They described how essential it was for them to at least feel "okay" about their family situation, to reach a level of acceptance that things are what they are, and not allow these hurts to continue harming them any further.

If you have experienced (or still experience) unhelpful or harmful family relationships and the hurt is getting in the way of your recovery journey, you shouldn't try to ignore or put up with it. Please seek out the support you both need and deserve to be able to move forwards with your recovery.

There are plenty of specific trauma services and family counselling services out there. They can help you to reach a place where your past experiences of family conflict stop getting in the way of your recovery. You deserve this! Mental health services will be able to connect you with these specialist services. We also suggest you seek the support of people you trust.

Congratulations!

You have reached the end of Module Four: Connecting and Belonging. This workbook has a lot more to offer, so we hope you'll continue reading the other three modules (if you haven't done so already).

Module One: Doing Things I Value

Want to live a satisfying life full of meaning and value? Great! This is the module for you. Because the way we spend our time is critical to our well-being, it's essential that we do things that bring purpose, good health, pleasure, fun and balance to our lives. Doing Things I Value focuses on doing things you value and enjoy, and adding healthy and constructive elements to your routine.

Module Two: Looking Forward

Are you feeling hopeful about your recovery? Do you understand that a mental health issue does not define you? This module can help you to develop the skills and attitudes you will need to play an active role in your own recovery and plan effectively for your future well-being.

Module Three: Mastering my Illness

Understanding how to manage our mental health issues is key to living the life we want. This module doesn't just help you to understand and manage your illness, but to MASTER it. It will help you to become the world's greatest expert in YOU!