



# LIVING WELL

Integral Care's peer support specialists have lived experience with mental illness or substance use disorder. In this newsletter, they share stories about recovery and offer hope for tomorrow.

Lead Editor: Nathaniel Hall, Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) Team Peer Support Specialist

## An Interview with Peer Support Specialist Bill Newcomb



**Bill Newcomb** is the peer specialist for Integral Care's Judge Guy Herman Center for Mental Health Crisis Care. Nathaniel Hall interviewed him.

**Nathaniel:** Part of a peer specialist's job is mentoring. What does that include?

**Bill:** Mentorship is a relationship in which a more experienced or more knowledgeable person helps to guide a less experienced or less knowledgeable person.

Sometimes peer specialists can look like teachers or coaches or sponsors depending on what we're doing. Peer specialists are experts in recovery and resilience. We've managed to get our life back on track after suffering a major disruption. Sharing our recovery story and what we've learned along the way is a major qualification for our job.

**Nathaniel:** Where do peer specialists get their expertise?

**Bill:** Life. My expertise comes from having lived with mental illness and all the associated challenges it presents. Peer specialists have all had major life disruptions due to mental illness and have survived and overcome. We use ourselves as examples, proof that people can, and do recover.

Recovery to me isn't a destination, it's a journey. One of my favorite quotes relating to peer support is "The first to help you up are the ones who know how it feels to fall down."

**Nathaniel:** What does a peer specialist focus more on – recovery and wellness or illness and disease?

**Bill:** Recovery and wellness without a doubt. One of the most important jobs a peer specialist has is to tell our recovery story. This is very different from a "war story" in that the focus is on how we got through the tough times. How we survived. What helped us get better and what didn't. This doesn't mean we shy away from talking about the bad stuff, the illness and its impact. It's the difference between just remembering the hard times and learning from the past.



One thing I've seen over the years is that people who struggle with mental illness often have a hard time having hope. Spending too much time focusing on problems can make them seem worse and lead people to a sense of hopelessness or powerlessness. Focusing on positive actions people can take gives them more of a sense of control and empowers them. Having ways of "fighting back" help people to not feel like helpless victims.

One of the things I do a lot of groups on is coping skills (see below for "50 Ways to Take a Break"). The number one way to take a break for me is "pet a furry creature." Here's a photo of Mr. Pickles, one of my cats.



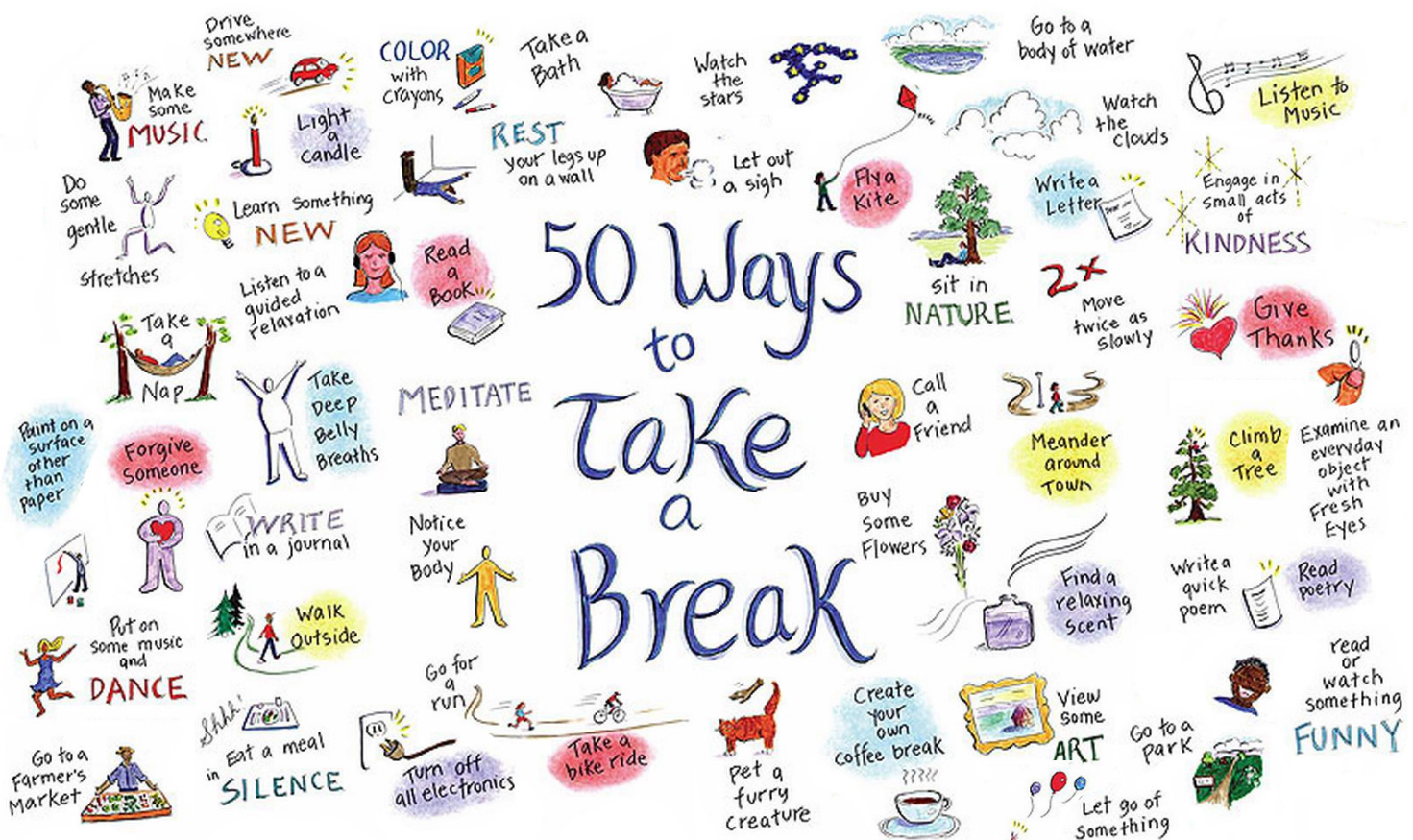
**Nathaniel:** What does "peer advocacy" mean?

**Bill:** It's frequently the case that people dealing with mental health challenges are told what their recovery should look like by family, friends or medical professionals. Peer specialists can help people define what they want their recovery to look like and help them to advocate for treatment that supports their goals.

Recovery means different things to different people. I define my own recovery as being able to live a happy and productive life, but I can't impose my definition on anyone else. For some people, it might just mean staying out of psychiatric hospitals. That was my main goal when I was newly diagnosed. Promoting self-determination is literally the first principle in the certified peer specialist code of ethics.

Another way peer specialists help advocate for our clients is navigating the mental health system itself. Sometimes this can mean translating the language used by specialists, for example "doctor speak." Sometimes it can mean aiding someone in finding help or resources.

*The Herman Center offers adults emergency mental health care in a safe overnight facility. Staff help adults who are in crisis by providing medical support, emotional support, medicine and connection to ongoing services. The Herman Center does not accept walk-ins. Referrals come from law enforcement and healthcare providers, like local emergency departments.*



# Green Smoothie Recipe

## INGREDIENTS

1 cup spinach  
1 cup water  
½ cup mango  
½ cup pineapple  
½ banana  
1 tablespoons of almond butter  
or ½ scoop of protein powder

## INSTRUCTIONS

Tightly pack cup of spinach in a measuring cup and then toss into blender. Add water and blend together until all leafy chunks are gone. Add mango, pineapple and banana and blend again until smooth.

*\*Use at least one frozen fruit to chill your smoothie. We often use frozen mango and banana.*



## William the Dyslexic Eagle

Once upon a time there was this little village of bunnies. It was a happy place with plenty of bunny parks and trails. The school was the perfect place for bunnies to learn all the things that bunnies do best. Hopping, nose twitching, carrot and cabbage gathering were just a few of the classes offered at the bunny school. Most bunnies loved their school and were very happy.

Except for William, once in a great while something miraculous would happen and a brilliant, magnificent eagle would be born. Since eagles were not born in bunny villages very often not many knew how special they were. Eagles were born to soar in the sky and see things with long eyes. Seeing with long eyes meant that they could take in everything at once. These wonderful birds think in pictures and often knew things that bunnies did not.

Life was wonderful when William was first born. His family cherished him and knew they had a very special child. But when William started bunny school everything changed. The bunny school had no classes on flying and soaring through the sky. They did not teach about seeing things with long eyes. Williams's claws were not made for hopping and he had no bunny paws that could easily grip a pencil for writing. William did not do as well at these classes as his bunny classmates. Some of his classmates were a little confused about Williams's abilities and would tell him he was not very smart. This hurt William's feelings and he grew sad. He would ask his parents why he could not do the things the other bunnies did so easily.

His mother would hug her eagle and say you are brilliant and magnificent. You are being taught a valuable lesson about the world. You are being groomed for greatness and leadership. This is why it is so hard. Never forget how it feels to be made fun of for you will be the one to stop injustice of others.

Being different is hard but when you grow up you will find other eagles who know how to soar in the sky. It will not matter that you see letters and numbers a different way; you are destined to see things in a new way and bring solutions to problems that need to be solved. **YOUR POWER IS IN THE DIFFERENCE YOU BRING.**

**William the Dyslexic Eagle by Deborah Rosales-Elkins, Integral Care Peer Support Specialist**

Texas System of Care 2018 Adult Mental Health Awareness Creative Art Contest 1st Place Winner

## Client Highlight - Joyce

My name is Joyce. 2011 was the most traumatic year of my life. I was 60 years old and I found myself bankrupt, divorced, and suddenly homeless. I was taken to Seton Shoal Creek and they diagnosed me with severe bipolar disorder. From there I went to a shelter. With the help of Integral Care, I now live in low-income housing, in a cozy apartment. It's been a life saver and I feel truly blessed. Because I would not have survived living on the streets. When I got my apartment, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. That was the feeling!

I have a fulfilling life now. I keep up with my appointments. I attend an exercise class once a week. I have nice neighbors and social activities. I find meditating and going to church keep me centered. Mental illness and homelessness can happen to anyone, just like it did to me. I didn't become a statistic. I have recovered and I am so grateful.



## WANT TO CONTRIBUTE?

We're accepting submissions for future issues of Living Well. Share your creative writing, artwork or personal story of recovery with us for consideration. Please send submissions to [Nathaniel.Hall@IntegralCare.org](mailto:Nathaniel.Hall@IntegralCare.org). We can't wait to hear from you! Please note: unfortunately, not all submissions will be printed.

### Resources

#### Psychiatric Emergency Services

Walk-in mental health urgent care for adults and children | 1165 Airport Blvd., 2nd Floor, Austin, 78702

**Hours** Monday – Friday, 8am to 10pm

Saturday, Sunday and Holidays, 10am to 8pm

#### 24/7 Helpline

512-472-HELP (4357) | A helpline for anyone who needs immediate emotional support

#### NAMI

Free classes and support groups for people affected by mental illness and their loved ones | [NAMIAustin.org](http://NAMIAustin.org)

### About Integral Care

We support adults and children living with mental illness, substance use disorder and intellectual and developmental disabilities. Our services include a 24-hour helpline for anyone who needs immediate support, ongoing counseling to improve mental health, drug and alcohol treatment to help with recovery, and housing to regain health and independence.



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**IntegralCare.org - 24/7 Helpline: 512-472-HELP (4357)**