

# Struggling with wanting to be well

Tara Tjahjadi (she/her)

Many mental health resources and types of support assume that if you are seeking mental health support that you want to stay well or want to work towards mental wellness. For a lot of people such as myself wanting to stay well or work towards recovery in and of itself is challenging.

## Why might someone struggle with wanting to be well?

It might be difficult to understand why someone who is experiencing mental health challenges may not want to recover or may engage in behaviours that are not conducive for recovery. For some people, identifying thought processes or behaviours that don't support recovery might be difficult and they might then do things that aren't in their best interests. For me personally, I usually understand how certain actions can ultimately work to harm my mental health but often choose to engage with these actions regardless.



Note that I use the word recovery here! Recovery can mean different things for different people and does not necessarily mean no longer struggling with your mental health. For me, recovery means being able to manage my mental health so that it is less impactful on my life.



People might struggle with wanting to recover because:

- Recovery or improvement can seem unattainable
- Change after a long period of feeling unwell can feel uncomfortable and unfamiliar
- Some behaviours associated with mental health conditions can make people feel in control of their lives
- Experiencing a mental health condition can become part of someone's identity
- Care and support can be viewed as conditional on struggling with your mental health
- They miss certain elements from periods of distress or ill-health

As someone who identifies as having complex and chronic mental health challenges, studies a mental health-related field, and works in roles which involve my lived-experiences of mental illness, mental health is a big part of my life. I find it difficult to separate my mental illness from my identity because much of who I am has been shaped by my experiences of mental health and support-seeking. This means that when I am managing my mental health I feel like I lose sight of myself, even if I know logically that I am much more than my mental health challenges.



Some people may not like to use this language!

I like to use the descriptors complex and chronic because I feel that they accurately capture my experiences. However, for some people this can feel stigmatising. I also will use the terms mental illness and mental health condition interchangeably.

When I asked Zoe, she says that she also uses the term chronic mental health challenges, having high support needs or living with psychosocial disability. Sometimes Zoe also uses the terms 'challenging' or 'complex' but she said that the language she uses is strongly influenced by the context and who she's speaking to.

I also miss certain parts of my mental health such as experiencing intense high-mood and energy, even though they are only enjoyable in the moment and have further impacts on my ability to manage daily life. In periods of wellness, I feel and react to things less intensely and I begin to believe that my "recovered self" is a diluted version of my true self. Without intense emotions or the need to manage them I feel empty and unlike myself, even if they did cause me distress and negatively impact my life.

A big part of my struggle with wanting to stay unwell is also the idea that I am "not unwell enough" to warrant care and support. In periods of wellness, I start believing that my mental health supports will no longer want to support me if they believe that I am not deeply struggling.

## **Signs that you might be struggling with wanting to be well**

Keep in mind that struggling to want to be well may look different for different people.

For me personally, some signs that I am struggling with wanting to stay well are:

- Purposefully putting myself in unsafe situations or situations which will make me upset
- Feeling the need to feel distressed after periods of mental wellness
- Avoiding places or people where I know I can get support
- Intentionally choosing to use harmful coping mechanisms instead of applying skills I have learnt from my mental health supports
- Aggravating or withdrawing from my relationships, particularly therapeutic ones, to 'test' if people still care about me

However, these behaviours often sabotage my mental wellness and end up impacting my work, studies and relationships. For example, although I test relationships to communicate that I want support, I know that this is not an effective method of communication and that in the long run I can end up damaging my relationships.

## **What can I do?**

Being able to identify the feelings and beliefs around why you are struggling to want to move towards recovery can be helpful in being able to find alternative ways forward.

This can look like:

- Brainstorming who you are outside of your mental health challenges
- Developing clearer communication, such as expressing when you want support (eg. "even though I'm not distressed right now, I would still appreciate having a chat"), rather than trying to elicit your distress or use harmful coping mechanisms to communicate that you would like support

- Challenging the belief that you need to be “bad enough” to receive mental health support

Something that has been helpful for me is recognising that I do not necessarily enjoy experiencing distress or ill-health in and of itself, but I enjoy the support that comes from it, the feeling of having something of mine to manage, and the ability to feel intensely about the world around me.

I hope that was helpful and sheds some light on a topic that can feel a bit counter-intuitive and isn't often discussed.

– Tara