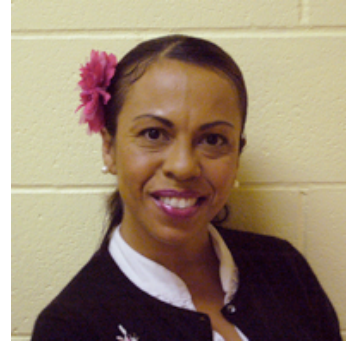


WRAP: Wellness Recovery Action Plan

Summarized by Thomas T. Thomas

“Bipolar, Major Depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder” read the paper sign that **Yaffa Alter**, the speaker at our September 26 meeting, held in front of her face. Then she crumpled the paper and said, “These are labels that I’ve been given—but that’s not who I am.”



YAFFA ALTER

Yaffa Alter is an empowerment coordinator at PEERS (Peers Envisioning and Engaging in Recovery Services, www.peersnet.org, 510-832-7337)¹ in Oakland. She explained that her life had been filled with extreme ups and downs, repeated hospitalizations, and the prospect of spending the rest of her life in the hospital. “I was a hot mess,” she said. Then one day a psych tech introduced her to the WRAP® process.

Standing for “Wellness Recovery Action Plan,” the WRAP program was developed by Mary Ellen Copeland, PhD, based on her experience with bipolar disorder after she turned out to be allergic to her medication. Working with other consumers, Copeland examined what coping methods each person had used to keep going. She then formulated these findings into the WRAP principles and tested them with others consumers around the country. Their consistent, positive responses were later validated by formal research, and the program has since been adopted and is used worldwide.

By embracing and following the WRAP program, Yaffa Alter was able to regain control of her life, graduate from San Francisco State University at the top of her class, with a major in public health and double minor in psychology and holistic health, and become a facilitator and trainer for the process.

“WRAP is a highly individualized, strength-based, self-determined process,” Alter said. “It allows each person who learns it to see that they are the experts on themselves. It focuses away from illness toward wellness. It encourages people to be active in life and responsibly engaged in the wellness process, because we’re with ourselves to the end of time.”

WRAP can be used on its own or as a supplement to mental health services, and PEERS honors either approach. The process is best learned in a facilitated group, where members can share ideas and insights into what works in different situations.

¹ Mission and Vision: “PEERS is a consumer-run organization that inspires hope and contributes to the resiliency and well being of mental health consumers through a not-for-profit commitment to compassion and excellence in eliminating mental health disparities.”

Alter identified five key concepts of recovery:

1. **Hope**—believing things can and will get better.
2. **Personal responsibility**—taking responsibility for yourself, letting go of blame, taking charge of your decisions and how you think, feel, and act.
3. **Education**—learning all you can about yourself and your illness. The more you educate yourself about mental health challenges, the more sense the program will make to you.
4. **Self-advocacy**—finding your voice and learning how to implement it in an assertive rather than an aggressive way.
5. **Support**—identifying people, places, and things that help you through the journey of recovery.

WRAP enables people to create structure for themselves, so they can operate on a daily basis. “It’s important,” Yaffa Alter said, “to work on your WRAP plan when you’re in a good space, not in a bad space.” The structure of each individual’s plan includes:

- **Wellness Toolbox:** Recollect and consider what makes you feel happy and puts a smile on your face. Identify things which are simple, safe, and inexpensive that will make you feel better. This is the place to develop and exchange ideas with others in a WRAP group.
- **Daily Maintenance Plan:** What do you feel like when you’re well? What things must you do to get through the day. These are essentials like getting up, washing, dressing, and eating. The essence of the WRAP plan is to be simple and specific and to identify the things that are important to you. Then consider things you might choose to do, like going to the gym or visiting with friends.
- **Triggers:** Identify external events and circumstances that make you feel uneasy. Have a plan so that you won’t feel that way. For example, Alter said one of her triggers is hearing sirens, and when she does, she keeps small stones that she can handle, or a bracelet or rubber band around her wrist she can pull—whatever distraction will help her get through that uneasiness.
- **Early Warning Signs:** Identify things you do to yourself that may be unrelated to reactions to a stressful situation, and how to deal with them. For Alter, an early warning sign is becoming irritable, and her action plan is to keep and review a set of inspirational cards and affirmations.
- **When Things Are Breaking Down:** Identify when you know you are close to a crisis, and what to do about it. For example, Alter knows a crisis is approaching when she feels herself ready to cry, and her response is to go to a faucet, rub her hands under cold water, and make herself present to the coolness.
- **Crisis Plan:** When things get bad and you’re not able to take care of yourself, have an advance plan to guides your support people about what you need. This is the part of the plan that other people will use. They should know what you are like when you are well, so they will know when to activate the crisis plan. The plan should identify each supporter and what his or her role is. For example, someone may be good at handling your money, while another will take care of your children. You should identify what medications you need to take and their dosages, as well as any meds that you have found to be

ineffective. You should identify your preferred treatment options, hospital care or home care, and alternative ways to help you. And finally, the plan should include ways for the support team to know when the crisis is over and they should deactivate the plan.

- **Post-Crisis Plan:** After you've dealt with the crisis, consider ways that you will get back in the groove, honor the healing process, and sustain wellness. As in the crisis plan, identify support people and their roles for this phase, too.

"WRAP is not about assigning blame and pointing fingers," Yaffa Alter said. "It's about taking responsibility and making a productive place for yourself in society."

PEERS, with an office on Hegenberger Road in Oakland, has about 20 people in Alameda County, of which about 90% are mental health and/or substance abuse consumers. They offer seven WRAP groups in the county, one for every day of the week, with at least one bilingual group in Spanish, and a group for transition age youth (TAY, ages 16 to 24). "Admission to these groups is free," Alter said, "and everyone is welcome" The group size ranges from four to about fifteen people, and each includes at least two facilitators.

The WRAP program includes a one-day overview workshop to introduce the process. There are also a three-day workshop and a five-day certification workshop for those who want to become facilitators. Although training in these programs is free, the facilitator program requires a written application and goes through a selection process.

In the coming months, PEERS will support WRAP programs and groups in the Peralta Community College District.

In addition to WRAP, the PEERS organization offers a variety of other programs, including:

- **Social Inclusion**, which embraces consumers and family members under the slogan "Stigma Stops with Me." As Yaffa Alter said, "It's all about getting through this thing called life together."
- **Crisis Intervention Training**, in collaboration with Alameda County's Family Education and Resource Center (FERC), to train law enforcement personnel about consumers' experiences with the 5150 process and different ways of interacting with people in crisis.
- **Strength-Based Training**, in which staff members gather Tuesday mornings at 8:30 for mindfulness meditation.
- **Empowerment Through the Arts**, which meets every third Thursday to explore poetry, dance, and theater, as well as workshops in visioning and forgiveness.
- **Sister Circle**, a group that meets every fourth Wednesday to engage in healing.
- **Lift Every Voice and Speak**, a program that has met with the City of Berkeley's Health and Human Services Department as well as in various houses of worship to share consumers' stories and break down the wall of stigma.