

Abraham Low

Jason Jimenez, M.S., Lisa K. Lashley, PsyD., Charles Golden, PhD.

Nova Southeastern University, College of Psychology

Dr. Abraham Low (1891–1954) was a Jewish-American psychiatrist and a pioneer in the treatment of mental disorders through self-help programs. He is known for founding Recovery, Inc., a self-help organization that is designed, in part, to fight against the stigma of mental illness. Dr. Low criticized the work of Freud, rejecting the psychoanalytic doctrine both as a therapeutic technique and ideology. He affirmed his belief that human conduct is not a result of unconscious drives but rather directed by personal will.

Dr. Low was born in Baranów Sandomierski, Poland on February 28, 1891. He graduated from the University of Vienna Medical School in 1919. After completing his internship in Vienna, Austria in 1920, Dr. Low immigrated to New York City, NY in 1921, obtaining his U.S. citizenship in 1927.

From 1921 to 1925, he practiced general medicine in New York City and Chicago, IL. In 1925, Dr. Low became a neurology instructor at the University of Illinois. He was later appointed Associate Professor of psychiatry and eventually promoted to Acting Director of the University of Illinois Psychiatric Institute. From 1931 to 1941, Dr. Low supervised Illinois State Hospitals, conducted seminars for the staff, and interviewed patients with severe mental illness. His research included infant speech and thought, histopathology of the brain and spinal cord, speech disturbances in brain lesions, shock treatment, and group psychotherapy. Dr. Low remained as part of the staff at the University of Illinois until his death.

Dr. Low is best known for founding Recovery, Inc. in 1937. He served as Medical Director from its creation until his death. Recovery, Inc.'s purpose was to prevent relapses in former mental health patients through control of their responses to psychiatric symptoms. To this end, Dr. Low would provide mental health aftercare for psychiatric patients and give lectures about his work to their relatives.

Under his care, the focus of Recovery, Inc. was to reduce symptoms of anxiety, panic, and depression. These symptoms were associated with relapse into a major psychiatric disorder, such as bipolar, schizophrenia, and other psychotic disorders. He was also concerned with issues of self-esteem and believed that low self-esteem could be overcome by reducing the stigma surrounding mental illness. The basic principles of the Recovery model of self-help are presented in his book *Mental Health Through Will Training*, originally published in 1950.

Through Recovery, Inc., Dr. Low provided a model for effective support group interventions. Some of the characteristics of self-help groups outlined by Dr. Low include: personal participation, face-to-face interactions, defining a purpose with agreed-upon actions, opposition to orthodox practices, and the use of a reference group for individual members that provides a point of connection and identification with others.

Recovery's self-help group program was designed to function outside of the physician-patient relationship. Using a technique called spotting, a patient could identify defeatist thinking among other group members and call the attention of the group for help. Within the group sessions, patients would present their case vignettes, beginning with a description of the problem and how it escalated to become a source of anxiety for the patient. Subsequently, the "spotting" of the problem was described, and Recovery principles were applied. At the end of the group

session, a summary of the issue was given and the current reaction to the problem was compared to previous reactions.

Dr. Low's three volumes of *The Technique of Self-help in Psychiatric Aftercare* were published by Recovery, Inc. in 1943. These include *Recovery's Self-Help Techniques: History and Description*, *Group Psychotherapy*, and *Lectures to Relatives of Former Patients*. In 2007, Recovery, Inc. changed its name to Recovery International in order to reflect its global nature.

Dr. Low died at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN in 1954. He was an interdisciplinary scholar and researcher who contributed to the fields of neurology, psychiatry, psychology, and group therapy. Although his contributions to the mental health field are often overlooked, his work continues to help many individuals today. His contributions deserve to be reexamined for any potential benefits to newer models of medicine and psychiatry, such as the biopsychosocial model.

Further Readings:

Rau, N., & Rau, M. (1971). *"My dear ones": The love story of a great physician for his patients*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Low, A. A. (1991). *Mental illness, stigma and self-help: The founding of Recovery, Inc.* Glencoe, IL: Willet Pub. Co.

Low, A. A. (1965). *Mental health through will-training: A system of self-help in psychotherapy as practiced by Recovery, incorporated*. Boston: Christopher Pub. House.