

The Nature of Addiction Recovery

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‘Recovery is the experience (a process and a sustained status) through which individuals, families, and communities impacted by severe alcohol and other drug (AOD) problems utilize internal and external resources to voluntarily resolve these problems, heal the wounds inflicted by AOD-related problems, actively manage their continued vulnerability to such problems, and develop a healthy, productive, and meaningful life.’ William L White, leading addiction recovery advocate, historian and researcher

1. Addiction is **not** a medical disorder that can be fixed by a medication or any other treatment, nor by a doctor or treatment practitioner. Recovery comes from the person with the problem. They do the work in overcoming their substance use and related problems, getting well, and getting their life (back) on track. Recovery is a process of self-healing.

Professional treatment, or engagement in mutual aid or other support groups, may facilitate recovery, but they do so by catalysing and supporting natural processes of healing in the individual. Family, friends, and others do the same in helping someone overcome addiction.

2. A second feature of recovery from serious substance use problems is that it does not occur in isolation. Connection to other people, or relationships, are a key element facilitating recovery. The maxim ‘I alone can do it, but I can’t do it alone’ is particularly pertinent to recovery.

3. Although formal treatment may help people, recovery occurs in the community rather than in the clinic. Treatment is generally the start of a recovery journey and is not needed by everyone. For those people who access local treatment services, the vast majority spend far more time in their community than in the treatment service. For those who attend a residential rehab, they continue their recovery journey upon returning to their community, where all they have learnt will be put to the test.

4. Recovery is a process that generally takes a long period of time and requires sustained effort. Recovery initiation and recovery maintenance are qualitatively different processes. Recovery is not a linear process. The person may make small gains followed by a major step forward. The person may falter, slide back, re-group and move forward again. Relapse is not a failure; it is part of the recovery process. It can be followed by a major move forward in the recovery journey.

5. Recovery is much more than just stopping use of drugs and alcohol. It is about repairing the damage caused by drug and alcohol-related problems, including problems which may have arisen as a result of poor treatment practices. It is about actively managing the person’s continued vulnerability to the problems that

arose from drug and alcohol use, and the initial problems (e.g. childhood trauma) that may have been a causal factor in the person's descent into problematic substance use.

6. Ultimately, recovery is about gaining and maintaining a healthy, productive, and meaningful life. It should be pointed out that not everyone who finds recovery gives up all drug and alcohol use.

7. Recovery is better predicted by someone's assets and strengths, rather than their deficits and weaknesses. People can make progress by identifying and building on their personal assets and strengths. Successful interventions to facilitate recovery focus on helping individuals to build recovery strengths, more often referred to as 'recovery capital'. Recovery capital is the quantity and quality of internal and external resources that one can bring to bear on the initiation and maintenance of recovery (please see below).

8. Recovery from addiction is holistic. It encompasses a person's whole life, including mind, body, spirit, family, community, culture and wider society. Treatment and support services need to address the multi-faceted needs of the recovering person. As addiction is generally a symptom of a deeper underlying problem, such as trauma, recovery is greatly facilitated by addressing such an underlying problem.

9. Everyone's recovery is different and deeply personal. However, whilst there are a multitude of pathways to recovery, there are a number of key factors that facilitate recovery from serious substance use problems. The importance of these factors has been illustrated in the narratives of recovering people about their journeys into and out of addiction.