

Defining Recovery Today

Bryn Gallagher

Introduction

My name is Bryn Gallagher and I am a woman in recovery. Among many things, this means that I have had the privilege of spending the last four and a half years re-aligning myself with the most meaningful parts of my life, without using substances. Before I made my way into recovery, I could show up for certain parts of my life, but rarely was I present and comfortable in my skin. I drank in a way that our culture has unfortunately normalized, especially for high school and college-aged people. I was a blackout drinker from the start and used alcohol as an escape route from my constant discomfort. I held on tightly to people, possessions, and alcohol, convinced they were the only solution to the growing emptiness that I felt.

My parents surrounded me with compassion and love and told me repeatedly that I was worthy of joy, fulfillment, and freedom. Still, I always felt like I was missing out on the best parts of life. No matter which milestone I reached, I never felt satisfied. At some point in high school, I developed a belief that two things could “fill” this pit: alcohol and people. Alcohol let me live in a delusional world where I had everything I thought I needed, though very little of it was actually healthy or beneficial. People also comforted me in an unhealthy way. From a young age, I have attached my own worth and security to the acceptance and validation of others.

For me, recovery has not been a one-woman journey. Many mentors and friends have guided me and each of them have shared with me the amazement, joy, pain, and growth that they have felt over the course of their own journeys. What I appreciate most about these people is that many of them approach recovery from different perspectives and with different definitions. Some have their roots in 12-Step Recovery, while others have found a solution in SMART Recovery or a devout yoga practice. Some think of recovery and sobriety as synonymous, while others practice harm reduction by continually aiming to use less, and in safer, healthier ways. In the beginning of my recovery journey, I did view sobriety and recovery as interchangeable and was not open to the idea that recovery could be defined in a number of ways. It is thanks to these mentors and the variety of definitions that they use to shape their recovery that my mind began to open. Having continued to sit with these (sometimes uncomfortable) ideas about how to define recovery, it now seems abundantly clear to me that we cannot expect one definition of recovery to be a perfect fit for the tens of millions of people in recovery across the country. With that

understanding in mind, a variety of definitions of recovery will now be discussed because, as recovery advocates, it is fundamentally important that we are well-versed in the many definitions of recovery that are in use. This broad base of knowledge will allow each of us to be a more effective advocate.

The concept of *recovery* is defined in many different ways. Varying definitions continue to be developed by organizations, governmental entities, and renowned dictionaries. This paper introduces a number of these definitions, defines concepts related to recovery, includes a discussion as to the importance of understanding the definitions, and offers suggestions as to which one(s) should be used. The following entities and concepts will be discussed: Oxford Dictionary, Connecticut Community for Addiction Recovery (CCAR), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, 12-Step Recovery, SMART Recovery, Natural Recovery, and Recovery Capital. As you read about the various definitions and concepts discussed here, take note as to the common themes or major differences, and consider which resonates most with you.

Oxford Dictionary

The Oxford Dictionary defines recovery as, “A return to a normal state of health, mind, or strength”.¹ This definition is not tied directly to substance use disorder but it is included as a foundation, or a jumping-off point, for the rest of the definitions. Even without explicit reference to substance use, the words used in this definition suggest the same sort of rehabilitation that we aim for on our journeys of recovery, no matter which pathway we choose.

Connecticut Community for Addiction Recovery (CCAR)

The CCAR definition of recovery is: “you are in recovery when you say you are”.² This definition is widely inclusive and leaves it up to each individual to determine what their recovery will look like. Its simplicity empowers each person to define their own recovery and places no barriers regarding level or length of sobriety. As the recovery advocacy movement expands, so

¹ English Oxford Living Dictionaries. “Recovery.” OxfordDictionaries.com. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/recovery> (accessed December 31, 2016).

² Connecticut Community for Addiction Recovery. “About CCAR.” CCAR.us. <https://ccar.us/about-ccar/> (accessed December 31, 2016).

do the number of pathways from which a person can choose. This definition empowers each person to speak their own truth about their recovery, rather than being boxed into someone else's opinion or definition.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

SAMHSA's definition of recovery, released in 2012, is as follows: "A process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential."³ Note that there is no requirement of "sobriety," nor are the words "drugs" or "alcohol" found within the definition. The focus remains on creating a healthy lifestyle by empowering individuals to choose their life's path.

The document in which SAMHSA released its definition is extensive and elaborates on many aspects of recovery including the establishment of four dimensions through which individuals achieve recovery. They include: *health* (overcoming or managing one's disease(s) as well as living in a physically and emotionally healthy way); *home* (a stable and safe place to live that supports recovery); *purpose* (meaningful daily activities, such as a job, school, volunteerism, family caretaking, or creative endeavors, and the independence, income and resources to participate in society); and *community* (relationships and social networks that provide support, friendship, love, and hope). These multiple dimensions encourage a structured daily lifestyle focused not on substances, but on human connection, overall wellness, and the importance of giving back.

The development and publication of this definition marked the first time that the federal government devoted time and money to standardizing and recognizing recovery. It is considered a milestone for the recovery advocacy movement because it signified the growing importance of recovery to both our nation and society.

Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation

The Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation (HBFF) offers both inpatient and outpatient treatment.

³ Del Vecchio, Paolo. "SAMHSA's Working Definition of Recovery Updated." SAMSHA.gov. <https://blog.samhsa.gov/2012/03/23/definition-of-recovery-updated/#.WYyOUcaZPEZ> (accessed December, 31 2016).

It defines recovery as: “A voluntarily maintained lifestyle characterized by sobriety, personal health, and citizenship.”⁴ Unlike those previously cited, in addition to encouraging overall health, this definition does specify that sobriety is a characteristic of recovery. The structure provided by this definition may be helpful or necessary to some. Note that the inclusion of “voluntarily maintained” emphasizes that, over time, the recovery process is personally-driven, rather than mandated by an external source. Note also that this definition is similar to the others in that it places importance on health and connection to one's community.

Where do specific recovery programs come into play?

When it comes to discussing recovery and the many possible pathways one can take to achieve it, 12-Step programs almost always come up – and rightfully so. Founded in 1935, Alcoholics Anonymous (and all of its subsequent iterations including Narcotics Anonymous, Codependents Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, etc.) was a pioneer in the addiction recovery field. The program has only one requirement for membership, and that is the desire to stop drinking.⁵ Many consider this requirement to be the program's definition of recovery and, although not explicitly included in the definition, the program's literature also suggests the importance of a spiritual element: “The A.A program of recovery from alcoholism is undeniably based on acceptance of certain spiritual values.”⁶ The literature goes on to state that such acceptance is not required, and that it is up to each member to determine the role that spirituality will or will not play in their recovery.

Regarding language used within this 12-step recovery model, many members of these programs will be the first to say that there are several commonly used terms and phrases they use to identify themselves. These terms are important to discuss here because they help paint a picture of what 12-Step recovery looks like from the inside. The two terms most relevant to this discussion are *addict* (including *junkie*, *druggie*, etc.) and *alcoholic*. Many 12-Step members identify strongly and proudly with one or more of these terms. An important point to be made about these words is that they serve many purposes within the walls of 12-Step meetings: they

⁴ Schwarzlose, John. “What is Recovery? A Working Definition from the Betty Ford Institute.” *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment* 33 (2007): 221-28.

⁵ A.A. Grapevine, Inc. “Frequently Asked Questions About A.A.” (New York, NY: A.A. Grapevine, 2009), 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

establish commonality; they offer an opportunity for members to feel a part of something bigger than themselves; and they might even serve as a foundation on which members build their own identity in recovery.

Given the anonymous nature of the programs, these words should stay within the 12-Step community. When in public, individuals should feel empowered to refer to themselves as “a person in recovery.” This language does not carry nearly the amount of societal stigma and shame that research has found is attached to words like “addict” and “alcoholic.”^{7 8 9} The ways in which those in recovery define their recovery affects public opinion, which shapes national policy. Public policy manifests itself in the ways that the States and the federal government choose to invest (or not invest) in addiction and recovery-related research, treatment, and so on. Lawmakers are most likely to enact policies that positively impact the recovery community if they are made aware that recovery includes well-rounded, blossoming, contributing members of society.

In summary, 12-Step programs serve countless people every day and the 12-Step definition of recovery deserves as much consideration as that of any other organization. In order to respect the anonymity of the programs and maintain boundaries between this pathway of recovery and others, the 12-Step terms discussed above are most appropriately used exclusively within the 12-Step community.

12-Step programs are joined by a multitude of other pathways to recovery. One such pathway that has gained national traction is Refuge Recovery. This approach to recovery Refuge Recovery is a Buddhist-oriented path to freedom from addiction that places faith in the Dharma, if applied, to relieve the suffering that comes with addiction, as well as additional sufferings. As Refuge Recovery materials explain, “This is a process that cultivates a path of awakening, the path of recovering from addictions and delusion that have created so much suffering in our lives

⁷ Pawlowski, Elaine. “Drug Courts: Criminal Approach to a Public Health Issue.” *TheHuffingtonPost.com*. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/elaine-pawlowski/drug-courts-criminal-appr_b_7884036.html (accessed February 8, 2017)

⁸ Kelly JF, Wakeman SE, Saitz R. Stop talking “dirty”: clinicians, language, and quality of care for the leading cause of preventable death in the United States. *The American journal of medicine*. 2014.

⁹ McGillicuddy, Peggy. “The Power of Labels.” *Articles | Recovery*. Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, 15 June 2014. Web. 8 Feb. 2017.

and in this world.”¹⁰

Recovery Capital

Coined by William White in 2008, the concept of recovery capital refers to the “breadth and depth of internal and external resources that can be drawn upon to initiate and sustain recovery from severe AOD problems”.¹¹ This concept has ties to strengths-based case management, recovery management, resilience and protective factors, and the ideas of hardiness, wellness, and global health.¹² Mr. White has identified three distinct types of recovery capital: 1) personal recovery capital; 2) family/social recovery capital; and 3) community recovery capital. Each of these sub-parts will now be discussed in turn.

There are both physical and “human” pieces of personal recovery capital.¹³ The physical pieces look a lot like basic building blocks for a productive and healthy life: safe housing that supports recovery; access to food, water, and transportation; health insurance and some form of financial stability. When a person has access to what’s listed above in this paragraph, their recovery capital is immediately greater. Human recovery capital is less tangible but just as important. According to Mr. White, it includes a client’s values, knowledge, educational/vocational skills and credentials, problem solving capacities, self-awareness, self-esteem, self-efficacy (self-confidence in managing high risk situations), hopefulness/optimism, perception of one’s past/present/future, sense of meaning and purpose in life, and interpersonal skills. Each person’s individual recovery can be dramatically influenced by their relationship to these examples of human capital.

Family/social recovery capital deals with close relationships (family, romantic, friend, and otherwise), especially with people who support one’s recovery. Someone’s family/social recovery capital is strongest when they have a support system that is healthily engaged with any aspect their recovery process (detoxification, treatment, harm reduction techniques, sobriety, etc.). This engagement can look like transportation to a meeting, the willingness to have an intimate conversation about recovery, or just some sporadic words of support.

¹⁰ Refuge Recovery. “About.” RefugeRecovery.org <http://www.refugerecovery.org/about/> (accessed July 24, 2017).

¹¹ White, W. & Cloud, W. (2008). Recovery capital: A primer for addictions professionals. *Counselor*, 9(5), 22-27.

¹² White, 1 (citing Granfield & Cloud, 1999; Cloud & Granfield, 1 2004.)

¹³ White, 2.

Finally, community recovery capital includes, but is not limited to, the existence of the following things within a community:

- active efforts to reduce addiction/recovery-related stigma,
- visible and diverse local recovery role models,
- a full continuum of addiction treatment resources,
- recovery mutual aid resources that are accessible and diverse,
- local recovery community support institutions (recovery centers / clubhouses, treatment alumni associations, recovery homes, recovery schools, recovery industries, recovery ministries/churches), and
- sources of sustained recovery support and early re-intervention (e.g., recovery checkups through treatment programs, employee assistance programs, professional assistance programs, drug courts, or recovery community organizations).

Community recovery capital also includes what Mr. White refers to as cultural capital. This type of community asset looks like multiple recovery programs being made available so that people of varying cultures and backgrounds do not feel the need to assimilate into another culture's recovery but, rather, can identify in recovery in the context of their own cultural origins.¹⁴

Why do these definitions and concepts matter?

So, you might be wondering, why should we care about how various organizations and dictionaries define the same word? Can't everyone define and practice recovery in their own way? The importance of the strings of words that make up these definitions is that they shape the way that we think about everything from complex ideas to small tangible things. The Webster's definition of "definition" is: "a statement expressing the essential nature of something".¹⁵ In order to understand and embrace how each of these organizations (CCAR, HBFF, 12-Step Programs) go about their work in this field, it is helpful to learn about their own definition of the concept of recovery.

The stigma surrounding addiction and recovery is still thick and, at times, I have chosen to let

¹⁴ White, 2.

¹⁵ Merriam-Webster. "Definition." Merriam-Webster.com <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/definition> (accessed February 8, 2017).

it silence me. I am quickly learning how important our storytelling will always be and I am so humbled and grateful to have the opportunity to open up with whomever is reading this. My hope is that we all learn the strength of our stories and the power to transform that they hold. My life today is more fulfilling and beautiful than I could have imaged it would be. I'm entering my third year of law school in a few weeks and have represented low-income clients this summer as a Student Attorney. My relationships and hobbies bring me a sense of purpose and excitement that, for a long time, I never thought I had the capacity to feel. All of us in recovery are more than what our past looks like. We are our present selves, full of ideas, lived experience, and life-changing potential, and our stories must continue to be told. Recovery is possible, and it can be defined in all of these ways and more. It has been my experience that, especially while in public, identifying as a person in recovery fills me with a sense of empowerment, strength, and a willingness to keep moving forward.

Which one should we use?

We believe that the more open-ended the definition is, the better. Those that focus on overall well-being and personal growth should be elevated and used as often as possible. It is our position that to implement CCAR's definition ("You are in recovery when you say you are.") is to give an individual the map to finding their own recovery journey. With this simple, short definition, each person is invited to use their voice for their own good. When defining recovery in this way, perhaps the most important thing to do is to make a variety of resources and supports clearly known to the individual so that, when they declare that they are entering or are already in recovery, they are simultaneously met with as much community support as possible.

Conclusion

As these examples show us, recovery can be defined in very specific or very broad terms. The most inclusive definitions, like CCAR's, place no requirement on sobriety or type of recovery, but allow individuals to define their own recovery path. Especially in the context of peer-to-peer services, it is important that both peers at least know where the other one is coming from when they speak about recovery. Their definitions do not need to match and, in fact, it can be an enriching experience if they are different. The beauty of honoring varying definitions and

Defining Recovery Today

pathways to recovery is that they can complement and enhance one another. As a peer, you can bring your personal definition to the table while receiving your fellow peer's definition with an open mind. This is a recipe for personal and interpersonal growth!

As this course teaches, we each play a role in making recovery possible for anyone who seeks it. One of the best ways that we can do this is to use person-first, non-restrictive, empowering language. How do *you* define recovery?