

# Recovery

## Opinion

Recovery is the final end product of a successful opioid addiction treatment program. Addiction is the hijacking of the brain's natural mood and feeling regulating system. With chronic use of opioids, the cerebral cortex (the brain area for conscious voluntary control of behavior) becomes subordinate to the primitive subcortical brain centers (involuntary behavior) causing opiate dependent patients to "lose control". These patients will experience intense cravings and continue to use opiates despite having negative health and social consequences. Recovery is about restoring the natural, spontaneous and healthy regulation of mood and feelings, thus reversing the addiction hijacking process.

Recovery is more than just being free of using opiates of abuse; it also is an attitude and life style change where the patient regains control of his social, psyche and physical environments. The recovering patient now understands the triggers for his/her past drug use and has developed conscious behaviors for avoiding relapse when exposed to certain triggers. Recovering patients have relearned how to "live life on life's terms" and know how to work through their problems without using mood altering chemicals.

Once patients have achieved sustained recovery, they develop a new perspective on life in general. They come to appreciate many of the things they ignored when they were in their active drug using state. Many of their previous negative behaviors disappear and are replaced by healthy positive reinforcing behaviors. In my experience, those patients who have been properly evaluated and treated for comorbid conditions, prescribed appropriate meds for their primary addiction disorder (to eliminate withdrawal symptoms, cravings and block reinforcing effects of their opiate of abuse), undergone intensive behavioral therapy and monitored for compliance with random drug screens, achieve the best rates of sustained and meaningful recovery. Finally, another predictor of long term recovery is the extent a recovering patient reaches out to help other addicted patients.

Of course, any patient in recovery is at risk for relapse regardless of how long they have been in recovery. Many patients relapse multiple times before they finally achieve lasting recovery. Relapse in itself does not mean failure but rather signifies that the treatment plan must be modified to better fit the needs of the particular patient. As with any other chronic disease, many patients with addictions require multiple treatment attempts to finally achieve a well defined treatment goal. Why then do we label patients with the disease of addiction to

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be treatment failures when they relapse. Instead, patients who relapse should not be abandoned and written off, but instead they should be more aggressively pursued and offered more focused treatment.

The benefits of sustained recovery to society are numerous and include; significantly reduced health related cost, decreased criminal activity, reduced incarceration rates and associated cost and re-establishment of productive taxpaying citizens. However, the most tangible benefits that most recovering patients share with me are the restoration of healthy relationships with family, friends and co-workers, return of their self esteem and regaining control of their lives once again.

Obviously, recovery is an achievable endpoint in many individuals with the disease of addiction. However, we as a society must understand that labeling addicted persons as criminals instead of as patients with a treatable brain disease, is an exercise in futility, costing this country billions of dollars. I am convinced that our tax dollars should be directed toward treatment, education, prevention and research to identify and help addicted persons, instead of directing funds for criminalization and incarceration to catch and punish these patients. Once we remove the stigma and criminalization of addiction, redirect funding efforts and bring addiction treatment into main stream medicine (as any other chronic disease), will we then be able to contain the current epidemic of addiction in our society.

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## Conflict of interest

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