Bill White on Recovery

Addiction recovery is far more than the removal of drugs from an otherwise unchanged life. Recent definitions of recovery transcend radical changes in the person-drug relationship and encompass enhanced global health and social functioning. The authors have carried on a decades-long interest in what has been christened *full recovery* or *amplified recovery*—a state of enhanced quality of life and personal character in long-term recovery. We each know individuals we believe have achieved such status and have asked ourselves what unique characteristics distinguish such persons. Here are some of our initial reflections on this question, offered here as an expression of gratitude to such people who have enriched our own lives.

They have been freed from the daily physical cravings (that insatiable itch) and distorted thinking that are at the heart of the addiction experience and that in the past rendered them uncomfortable within their own skin. The necessity to live life drug free has shifted from a perceived curse to a gift that one wears comfortably and humbly. Their recovery is no longer a struggle, but a set of favorite old clothes worn comfortably like a second skin.

They are not in the grip of non-substance cross-addictions such as gambling, sex, food, money, and control. (They also embrace smoking cessation and other acts of self-care within their personal understanding of recovery.) They may have tangled with one or more of these addictions earlier in their recovery career but typically somewhere between 10 and 15 years they were able to shake them. Some experience periodic temptation but they move through these periods, not through an assertion of will but by talking to other people about managing these shadow dimensions of personal character.

They are capable of achieving stable and emotionally rich relationships with partners, family members, friends, and colleagues. Their history of past relationships may be harrowing but they have now tamed the disruptive and self-destructive patterns of behavior that previously complicated their relations with others. Rifts in family relationships have been healed to the extent possible.

Regardless of whether they have pursued a secular, spiritual, or religious pathway of recovery, they continue to work an active program of recovery that includes self-inventory, honest acknowledgement of misdeeds, personal amends, and acts of service to others. In addition, they address with equal determination issues of resentment and the forgiveness of others who have harmed them.

Most reflect in their lives four qualities that are fundamental to a life of spiritual substance- humility, compassion, honesty, and gratitude.

They laugh regularly and deeply with rather than at people. They find joy and humor in the simple incongruities and absurdities encountered in daily life. The can offer healing laughter and a twinkle in the eyes as a balm to those in early recovery whose daily emotional dramas seem unceasing. Theirs is a healing laughter.

They are open-minded and inquisitive. They acknowledge that their own views and convictions may be mistaken or limited. They are thus eager to learn about the experiences and opinions of others and to expand their knowledge of the world. They have fully relinquished the distorted belief that the universe revolves around them. They listen more than they speak.

They give service to the community outside of their immediate recovery support network, usually on a volunteer basis. In addition, they are aware of the value to the larger society of maintaining a personal posture of openness, civility, and compassion. They view this posture as an act of needed service that, through its infectiousness, counter the poisonous tone of current social and political discourse.

They have worked through childhood traumas, one of the most tenacious causes of addiction recurrence. Working through does not mean putting it behind them (negating the suffering) but rather integrating the trauma experience in a manner that transmutes their suffering into compassion for themselves and others. It remains fresh, but not disabling, so that they can draw from it in helping others. In our observations, most of this trauma work occurs after five years of stable recovery.

For those achieving amplified recovery within a 12-Step program, most maintain meeting attendance of at least once a week. They usually have a sponsor and sponsor others. They periodically brush up on the steps, sometimes by facilitating step studies. At the same time, however, they are non-dogmatic about the program and take ample advantage of other aids to recovery such as psychodynamic therapy, CBT, yoga, meditation, the Buddhist grounded program of Refuge Recovery, and energy healing.

They recovered through living narratively—what some call *living out loud*. In the beginning, they told the story of their past, affirming that they did not want to return to their former way of life. Next, they began to contrast the present and past as they sought to construct a new identity centered in a new set of values. They became at ease talking about their experiences and their feelings—literally talking their way into a new more transparent existence, leaving behind their former duplicitous, self-absorbed, self-contained personage.

In the process of constructing a new identity, they faced the challenge of shame that is typically rooted in the past and revitalized by present events and relationships. Shame is the most potent impediment to recovery—the whisper that we are not worthy of recovery and the fruits it can bring. In tackling their shame, they discovered what Brene Brown found through her grounded theory research – shame is defeated by vulnerability, by developing exactly the wide-open stance toward the world that shame warns us against.

They have developed the capacity to listen closely and effectively to other people, and particularly to their pain. They are “wounded healers” who use their own survival to help others facing similar threats and opportunities. From a deep plunge into their own depths of agony, they emerged with new capacities for hope and love.

They have found meaning and purpose in their lives beyond themselves, one that evolves through an epiphany at the intersection of transcendence and communion. The nature of this transcendence varies greatly from formal religious faith to the sense that the universe vibrates with either love or hate, depending on what we humans project into it through our thoughts and deeds. They have committed themselves to healing themselves, their families, their communities, and, to the extent possible, the world, knowing that they will pursue this effort imperfectly but relentlessly and that profound meaning lies within that pursuit.

We have met some wonderful people through our recovery journeys—people who have lived full meaningful lives in recovery and exhibited exemplary qualities of character and styles of daily living. In closing, we should also note that we have met others not in recovery who shared these traits and lifestyles but who had survived their own “dark night of the soul” and had emerged as different and quite remarkable people. Surviving life-threatening events or conditions have the potential to be life-transforming—taking people beyond survival and healing to the status of healers in their own right. We hope your life has been similarly blessed by your encounters with such people.

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