*Abstinence:* The refraining from an indulgence of appetite, or from customary gratification of one’s appetites; it denotes a total forbearance, as in fasting or in giving up the drinking of alcoholic liquors.

*Sobriety:* A two-part definition: the state or quality of being sober; specifically, (a) temperance or moderation, especially in the use of drink; (b) seriousness, solemnity, gravity, or sedateness of manner or appearance.

*Recovery:* Four definitions. (a) The act or power of regaining, retaking, or conquering again; (b) a getting well again, coming or bringing back to consciousness, revival of a person from weakness; (c) a regaining of balance . . . a return to soundness; (d) the time needed for recovering.

Note: Abstinence and sobriety are necessary conditions for recovery, but not everyone who is abstinent is in recovery. Recovery indicates changes to lifestyle patterns and interactions. Other alternative definitions:

*Abstinence:* No use of any drug of abuse; in some cases, this may also mean no participation in non-drug compulsive behaviors that have been part of one’s addictive pattern.

*Sobriety:* Usually used in treatment and 12-Step programs to mean the same as abstinence. However, because it can be interpreted to mean only not getting high or drunk, some use it to mislead, telling themselves that even though they used or drank it wasn’t enough to get them high or drunk, so they were still sober.

*Recovery:* Changing from a lifestyle of addiction and other self-destructive, dishonest behavior to one of abstinence and healthy, honest behavior.

# Stages, Events, and Experiences of Recovery

It is important to remember that recovery is a process, much like learning to walk, to play the piano, or to type. As a process, it involves stages that occur over time and build on skills learned in previous stages. It is also important to point out that there is no definitive time frame of recovery that occurs for everyone; many people experience “stuck points” or “backslides” when they must find new ways to continue making progress forward. Further, some things simply get better with time, and only with time.

## Early Recovery: Turning Things Around (Physical Detoxification)

This stage typically lasts for the first few months of recovery and involves the following:

• *Getting physically clean:* Getting through withdrawal; coping with life without chemical filters/distortion/insulation; regaining physical balance from rebound effects. This may last for days or for as long as several months depending on the drug(s) and the length and amount of use.

• *Growing awareness:* As the “clearing of the fog” continues, newly recovering people often feel the following:

1. *Hope and exhilaration:* Sometimes called the “pink cloud effect,” this is the sometimes giddy feeling that comes from having hope after having felt despair.
2. *Enthusiasm and determination:* Often, drug-dependent people have spent a long time, maybe all their lives, feeling that there is something basically wrong with them, or that there is no explanation for what is going on in their lives, or that substance-abusing behavior is part of their basic nature and therefore unchangeable. Newly recovering people find explanations for their behavior that make sense, that don’t label them as defective, and that offer solutions. The natural reaction is to latch on with both hands.
3. *Letdown and fear:* At the same time, most people feel: “Quitting was supposed to make my life better, and now I have more problems than before! I don’t know if I can deal with all these problems!” What is really happening: They’re starting to see problems to which they were blind before (though others may have tried to point the problems out) and realizing the size of the mess they must now clean up. The work ahead may look overwhelming.
4. *Frustration:* “Nobody respects what I’m trying to do. They won’t believe I’ve changed.” Because part of the addictive lifestyle has usually involved lying to and hurting themselves and others, newly recovering people may find that others are reluctant to trust them, thinking that this is just another lie, another promise that will be broken or attempt at sobriety that will fail. Also, because many people don’t understand addiction and think it is a sign of weak will or defective character, they may think the recovering person is unable to change. Either way, it hurts to go to people to seek support, and to start making amends, and be rejected or scorned.
5. *Connection to others:* “I finally fit in somewhere.” After a lifetime of feeling out of place and misunderstood, newly recovering people find themselves surrounded by others who can relate to them and have had similar experiences. They often feel as if they’ve finally found their real families or that they’re home at last.
6. *Loneliness:* At the same time, they may feel: “All my old friends still use/drink!” Human beings are drawn to connect with other people, and part of recovery is usually building a new network of friends and activities. At the beginning, this new social network doesn’t exist yet.
7. *Feeling strange or out of place:* “I don’t know how to act!” Because psychoactive drug abuse tends to stop emotional growth and development of social skills at the age when heavy use begins, people in their 20s, 30s, or older may be picking up where they left off as adolescents, and feel the same confusion as teenagers trying to figure out how to stop being children and become adults.

• *Ongoing cravings and urges to use/drink:* Habits take time to change, and drug habits are among the strongest—they have actually made physical changes in the body and brain. These cravings may hit at times of stress, or they may hit with no apparent reason at a time when things seem to be going well or nothing seems to be going on. Either way, cravings are normal, and people can learn skills to cope with them without using or drinking.

• *Questions about spirituality and values:* The 12-Step programs emphasize a relationship with a higher power, and recovery involves a shift in values and ethics in daily life. At the same time, many newly recovering people feel they have been hurt or deeply disappointed by the God they may have been taught about as children, and they may have reason to doubt or reject the proclaimed religion, values, and ethics others have urged on them so far in their lives. This phase may see newly recovering people seeking answers to these questions in a variety of places, including 12-Step programs, other self-help programs, churches, books, and the guidance of others they trust.

• *12-Step work during early recovery:* During this early stage, newly recovering people are laying the foundation for a new life and beginning to build on that foundation. In the 12-Step programs, this process is given structure by Steps 1 through 7. In these steps, people come to a realistic view of themselves and their situations; break through their isolation to start establishing healthy relationships with other people and with a higher power; and begin the process of changing the patterns in their lives that have been destructive.

## Middle Recovery: Solidifying Change and Putting One Foot in Front of the Other (Emotional Detoxification )

During this time, the *new patterns* established in early recovery are being strengthened and becoming habits themselves. The old life had a structure built on drug and alcohol use and impulsive and compulsive behavior; the new life also needs a structure, and one built on new routines and new ways of coping with life is becoming stronger and more comfortable. Experiences and feelings during this stage include:

1. *Settling in:* As new practices become habits, they become automatic, and recovering people find themselves noticing that they are doing different things and responding differently to people, places, and situations, without having to stop and think about it as often. Others also notice and comment. New acquaintances who find out about the past may be surprised and say that sounds unlike the people they see.
2. *Growing strength and confidence*: Recovering people at this middle stage find themselves less fearful and anxious and start noticing the distance they have come, especially when they see newcomers who remind them of their earlier selves. They find they have much to offer others. They may need to be on guard at this stage against overconfidence.
3. *Overconfidence*: It can be tempting to think that they have changed and gained control over their lives to such a degree that they can now handle either some drug use or other behaviors that they were unable to control before. They may think to themselves, “Maybe I’m not really an addict or alcoholic after all—maybe it just got away from me before.” It is a good idea at this stage to talk with a trusted friend who knows them well and understands how their addiction works. At the same time, however, there may be new awareness of addictive behaviors.
4. *New awareness of addictive behavior in other areas*: As people continue to grow in emotional and mental health and experience of recovery, they may realize additional ways they are still acting like addicts and alcoholics, usually in family, work, and social situations.

Continued improvements in quality of life are seen in several areas:

• Physical health and feeling of well-being

• Improvement of moods: relief of chronic depression, anxiety, anger

• Rebuilding or improving relationships with others: family, work, social

• Financial situation

• Relationship with spiritual side of life or higher power

• Plans, goals, and prospects for the future

During middle recovery, recovering people are continuing the process of change begun in early recovery and extending it into more areas of their lives. In the 12-Step programs, this continuation is supported by steps 8 through 10. In these steps, people continue to clean up the wreckage of their past and work daily to avoid losing ground gained in the areas of honesty and creating new patterns during early recovery.

## Long-Term Recovery: Maintenance and Continued Growth (Maturation)

1. *Maintenance activities:* During this stage, the emphasis for most people is on relapse prevention, avoiding falling back into old patterns:

• Continued participation in meetings

• Feedback from others, especially sponsors

• Continued study and emphasis on recovery (Step study groups, etc.)

2. *Greater focus on helping others*: Helping others, with addiction-related issues and in general, comes to feel more and more natural and necessary:

• Others seek out advice.

• Sponsorship, speaking at meetings, starting new groups, and service tasks.

3. *Tackling new problems and issues*: As people integrate new values and attitudes into their basic outlook on life, they find themselves acting on the new awareness they found in middle recovery in areas where they need to make changes. They often seek to apply the same methods that have helped them overcome addiction.

• Using known tools (12-Step program, other resources) on new issues.

• Starting participation in other programs. This may have started earlier.

4. *12-Step work in long-term recovery*: During this stage, the focus is on maintenance, as noted above, and on gradual continued growth. In the 12-Step programs, this is supported by steps 10 (which also fits into middle recovery) through 12. In these steps, people work to strengthen and deepen the habits and values that have changed their personalities and to bring their lives into closer harmony with these principles.