

# *Say Recovery:* Language and Messaging

## **Missouri Stakeholders Learning Community**

Tom Hill

The National Council for Behavioral Health

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# The Power of Language

Sticks and stones  
may break my  
bones,  
But words will  
never hurt me.



# The Power of Language



Words are important.

If you want to care for something, you call it a flower.

If you want to kill something, you call it a weed.

Don Coyhis

# The Power of Language



For more than two centuries, addicted and recovering people in America have been the object of language created by others.

William White (2001)

# Language: Five Considerations

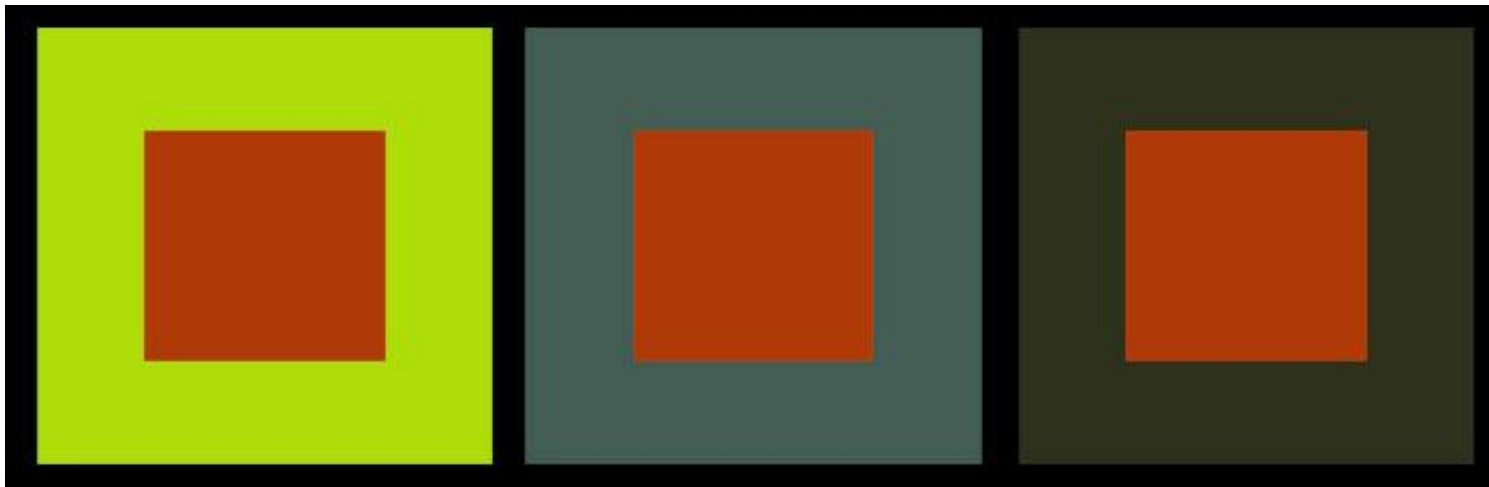
1. Context
2. Ideology and Codification
3. Strategy
4. Tone
5. Vision





# 1. Context

- Internal vs. external
- Formal vs. vernacular
- Academic vs. street
- Mutual aid group vs. recovery movement
- Clinical vs. peer environment



## 2. Ideology and Codification



- Historical
- Cultural
- Political
- Institutional

### Ideology

A system of ideas, ideals, and a manner of thinking, characteristic of a group or social class, especially one that forms the basis of economic or political theory and policy.

# 3. Strategy



- Reframing
- Renaming
- Reclaiming



## 4. Tone

- Affirming
- Strength-based
- Non-pathologizing
- Positive
- Transformative
- Inclusive
- Person-first
- Recovery-oriented
- Trauma-informed



## 5. Visionary



- Evolutionary
- Consciousness raising
- Education and communication
- Movement building
- Paradigm shifting



# Consciousness Raising

Developing awareness in a person or group; making connections with moral, social, and/or political issues; and producing change-oriented action.

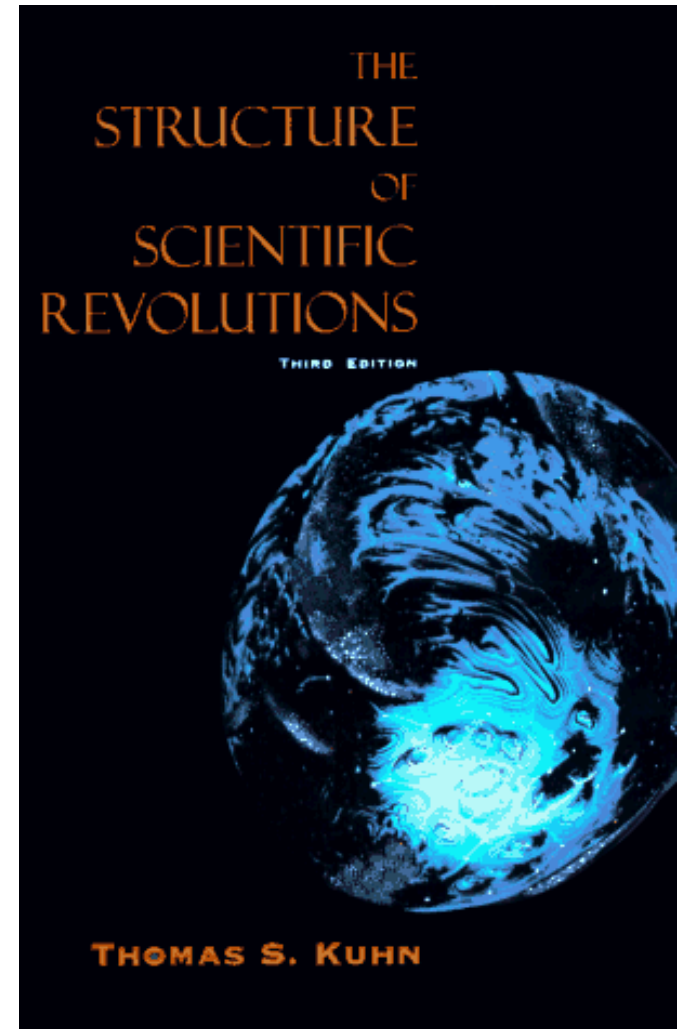


- What is?
- Why is?
- What should?
- How should?

Janet Freedman (2014)

# Paradigm Shift

In 1962, Thomas Kuhn wrote The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, and parented, defined, and popularized the concept of "paradigm shift." Kuhn argues that scientific advancement is not evolutionary, but rather is a "series of peaceful interludes punctuated by intellectually violent revolutions", and in those revolutions *"one conceptual world view is replaced by another"*.





# Paradigm Shift



A fundamental change in approach or underlying assumptions; a change from one way of thinking to another.

It just does not happen; it is *driven by agents of change* and is eventually accepted by a majority as a changed belief, attitude, or way of doing things.



# Language



**Language can be shaped, influenced, and created by:**

- Public perception and attitudes
- Informal cohort groups
- Media and technology
- Political systems and interest groups
- Professional guilds
- Academia
- Others



Reforming the language we use to describe things related to addiction is not merely an exercise in semantics or political correctness. *Words can be an effective tool in helping to destroy the stigma encountered by people with addictions.*

In a field that is locked in moral combat with stigma, describing people with addictions as “*abusers*” of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs helps ensure that the onus of addiction remains solely upon the shoulders of the individual...

Bob Curley

*“Wrong” Words Used to Define, Defame Addiction and Recovery*  
(Join Together Online, 2001)

# Stigma

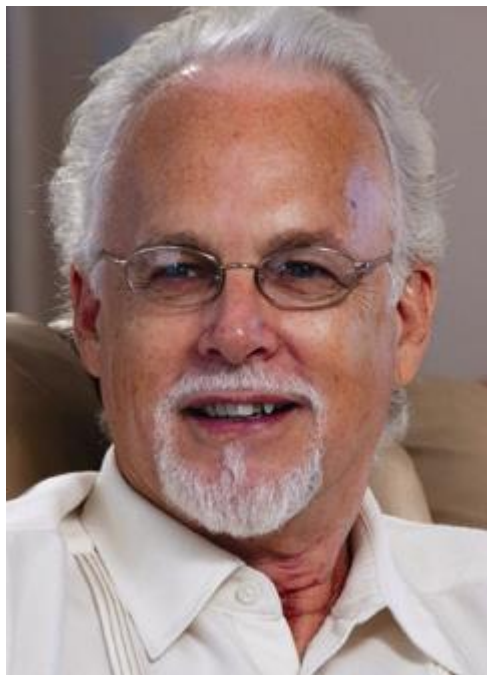


A mark of disgrace or infamy, a stain, or a reproach, associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person.

To refer to people who are addicted as *abusers* misstates the nature of their condition and calls for their social rejection, sequestration, and punishment. *There is no other medical condition to which the term abuse is applied.*



Referring to people by their shared medical diagnosis assumes any important differences have been lost to the homogenizing influence of their disorder. “Disease first” language, as opposed to “*people first*” *language*, obliterates individual differences and depersonalizes those to whom the label is applied.



...stigmatized peoples reject labels applied to them by others and replace this language with words of their own choice or creation.

It is about changing the language that affects social policies and is, in turn, affected by those policies.

The [Recovery] Movement can try to rehabilitate the existing language by reframing it or squeezing as much poison out of it as possible, or the New Recovery Advocacy Movement can coin and promulgate a new pro-recovery vocabulary.

William White (2001)



# Commonly Used Words

- Substance abuse
- Denial
- Resistance
- Relapse
- Triggers
- Relapse prevention
- Clean/dirty
- Sober
- Self-help
- War on Drugs
- Dually-diagnosed
- Enabler
- Codependent
- Untreated
- Alcoholic
- Addict
- Client
- Consumer
- Non-compliant
- Avoidance
- Triggers
- Felon
- Ex-offender
- High-functioning
- Special populations
- Case manager



# SAY THIS

# NOT THAT

Person with a substance use disorder

Person living in recovery

Person living with an addiction

Person arrested for drug violation

Chooses not to at this point

Medication is a treatment tool

Had a setback

Maintained recovery

Positive drug screen

Addict, junkie, druggie

Ex-addict

Battling/suffering from an addiction

Drug offender

Non-compliant/bombed out

Medication is a crutch

Relapsed

Stayed clean

Dirty drug screen



# What is Recovery Messaging?



- Recovery messaging puts the focus on *recovery*.
- Recovery messaging changes the public's perception of what the word recovery means.
- Recovery messaging allows recovery advocacy to be effective at changing the conversation from the problem to the solution.



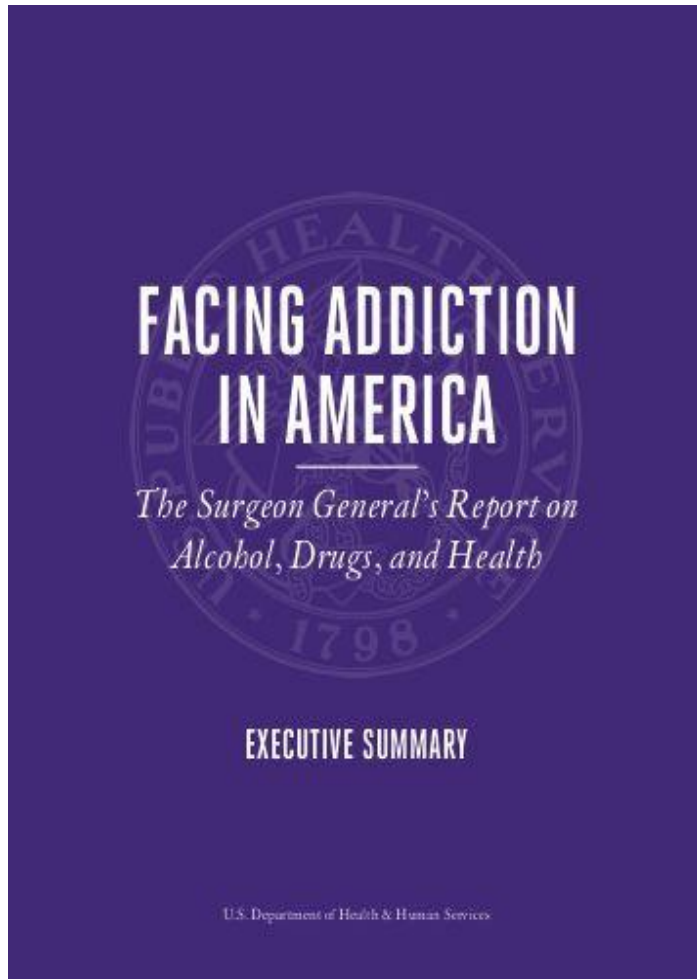
# Tips for Recovery Messaging

1. Highlight aspects of your personal story
2. Focus on your recovery, not on your addiction
3. Keep it simple
4. Avoid jargon
5. Emphasize many pathways to recovery
6. Connect stories to data
7. Underscore an advocacy issue or series of issues
8. Suggest a solution





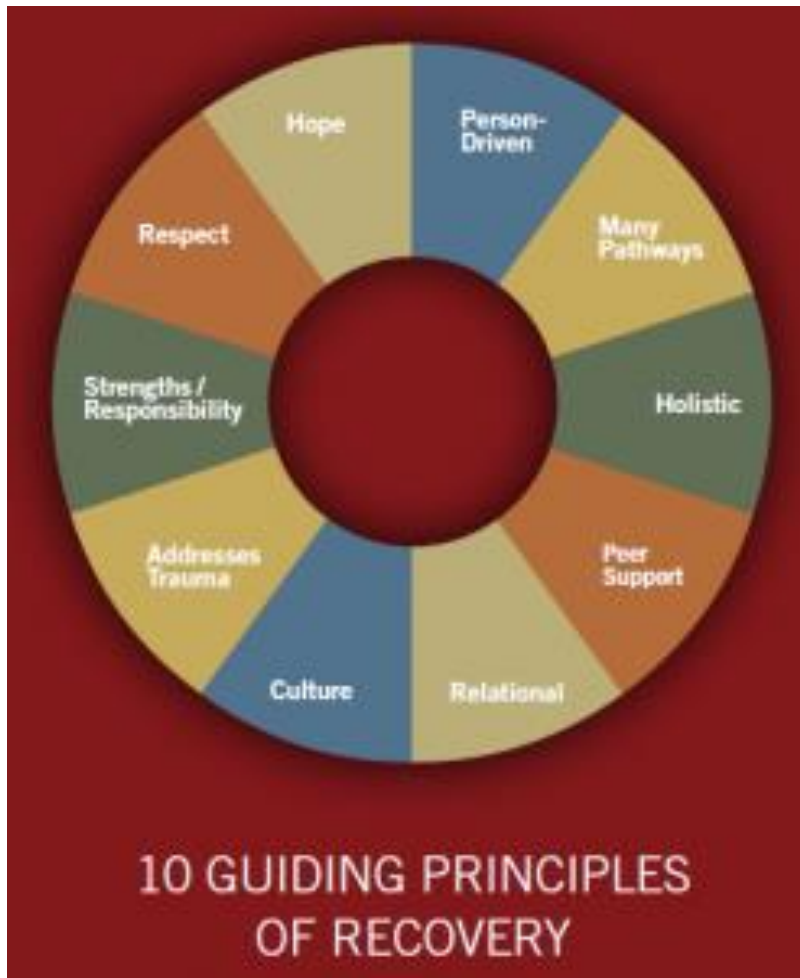
# Addiction: Science-based Definition



*“Well-supported scientific evidence shows that addiction to alcohol or drugs is a chronic brain disease that has potential for recurrence and recovery.”*



# SAMHSA's Working Definition of Recovery



A process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential.

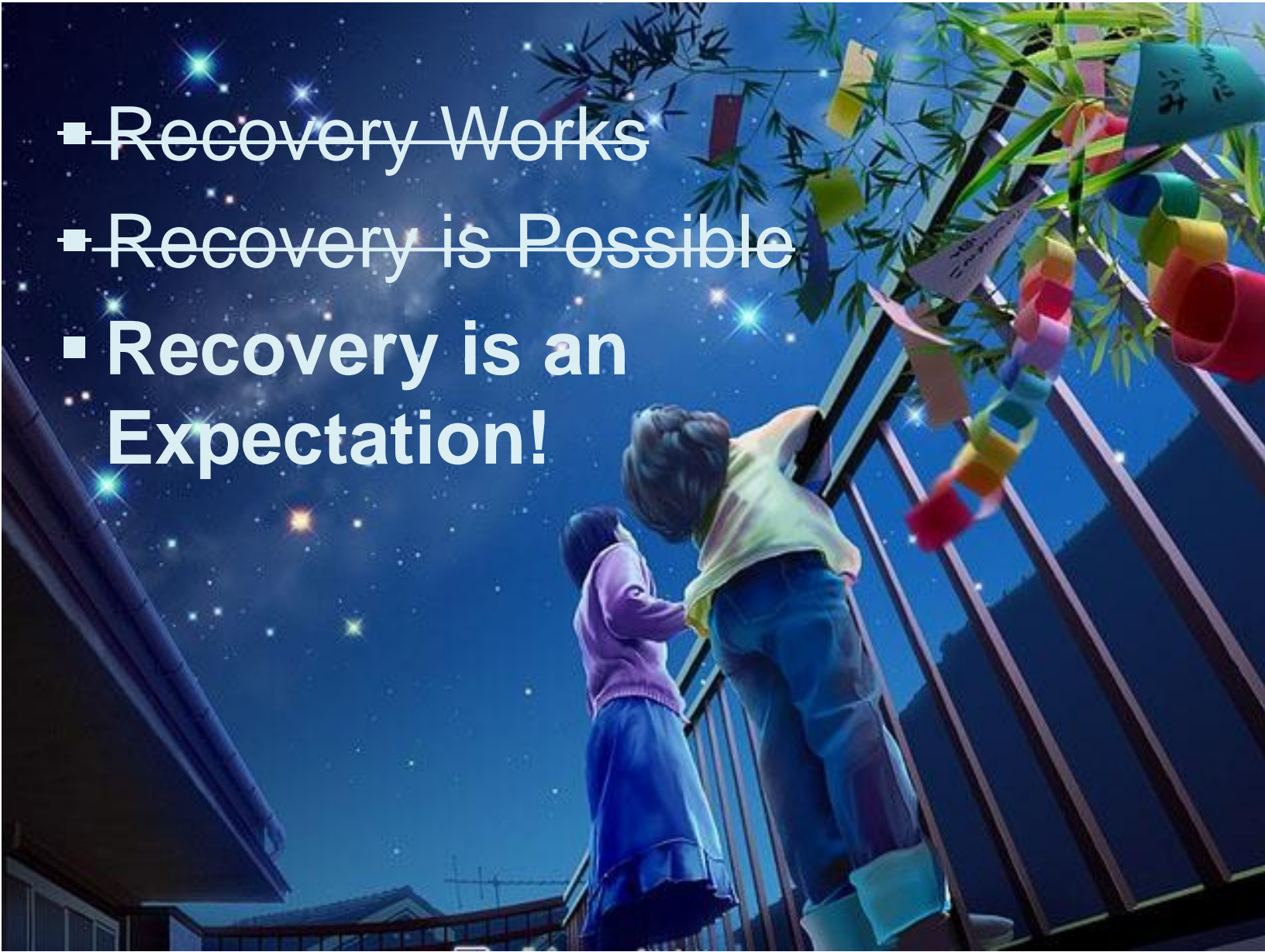
SAMHSA,  
2011

# When to Use Recovery Messaging



- Talking to family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers
- Introducing yourself and speaking in public
- Media interviews
- Meeting with public officials, policy makers, and agency leaders
- Written pieces
- Social media



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- ~~Recovery Works~~
  - ~~Recovery is Possible~~
  - **Recovery is an Expectation!**