



# Recovery Science and Harm Reduction Reading Group: May 2021 Summary

## Article Summary

This article writes about how recovery from substance use is a social process instead of an individual process. The authors describe how the current understanding of recovery is "individualistic recovery", which focuses on individuals changing their own thoughts and feelings in relation to substance use. Instead, the authors suggest "relational recovery" as a way to address the social conditions that shape a person's recovery. These social conditions could include relationships with family and friends and educational, economic, and political circumstances.

Several examples of scientific research that contribute to relational recovery are described, including a culturally-sensitive model that considers issues marginalized communities face, such as migration stress, social marginalization, and racism. Other examples include research focused on how the health of social and family relationships are essential to recovery and that addressing these needs can contribute to healthier relationships to substance use.

To apply a relational recovery approach, service providers should consider the social and home lives of their patients, and how these can influence the effectiveness of a treatment plan. Providers should also consider how patients' life conditions may also contribute to their recovery and if providers can also find ways to address these conditions.

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### Relational recovery: beyond individualism in the recovery approach

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#### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** While the recovery approach in mental health currently enjoys immense support, it is not without its critics. The most persistent criticisms focus on the individualism underpinning many conceptualisations of recovery. In this paper, we outline the shortcomings of individualistic approaches to recovery, and explore the alternative notion of *relational recovery*.

**Method:** We begin this article by reviewing recent research and theory that critiques individualistic approaches to recovery. We then draw together disparate bodies of research that view recovery as an inherently social process.

**Results:** Our reading of the literature suggests that although many models of recovery recognise relationships or connectedness as a component of the recovery process, an overemphasis on the 'inner', subjective experiences of people with a lived experience of mental ill-health largely obscures the interpersonal contexts of recovery. Interpersonal relationships can more accurately be seen as suffusing all aspects of recovery, including experiences such as hope, identity and empowerment.

**Discussion:** We conclude by arguing that the way forward for mental health systems lies in developing, promoting and implementing approaches that properly acknowledge the irreducibly relational nature of recovery.

#### ARTICLE HISTORY

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#### KEYWORDS

Recovery; family recovery; individualism; connectedness; relational; mental illness

#### Introduction

Recovery is said to be 'personal'; it is 'deeply individual'. Why would anyone object to that? Because we are not isolated individuals, to put it bluntly. (Rose, 2014, p. 217)

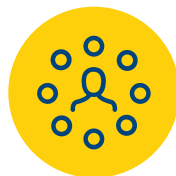
In recent years, the recovery approach has increasingly influenced mental health policy and practice throughout the English-speaking world (Slade et al., 2014). As Hunt and Resnick (2015) observed, recovery is 'the rallying cry of 21st century mental health care reform' (p. 1235). With its genesis in the liberatory psychiatric survivor movement of the 1960s and 1970s, recovery has since 'gone mainstream', and is enthusiastically embraced by mental health professionals, academics and policymakers alike (Braslow, 2013; Rose, 2014). Like the biopsychosocial approach in psychiatry, which provided the grounds for the adoption of holistic and integrated approaches in mainstream mental health services

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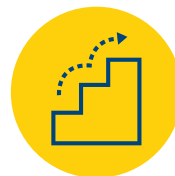
## Key meeting themes



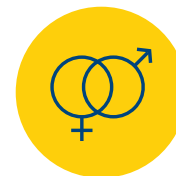
Substance use and mental health are linked but distinct.



Substance use treatment should focus more on social contexts.



Relational recovery can draw people into treatment.



Challenges in recovery differ across gender identities.

# DISCUSSION SUMMARY

The following themes came from the discussion:



## **Substance use and mental health are linked but distinct**

Some people living with a substance use disorder experience mental health issues as a result of their substance use, and some with mental health issues manage their illness through substances. The best treatment options are ones that respond to the needs of the client.



## **Substance use treatment should address social contexts**

Currently, many treatment plans focus on changing the individual without addressing their relationships or environment. Financial models in behavioral medicine make it hard for providers to address social contexts.



## **Relational recovery can draw people into treatment**

Recovery for many people is less about directly addressing substance use and more about leading fulfilling lives through work, school, friends, and family. Some people in recovery may just want ways to connect with others.



## **Challenges in recovery differ across gender identities**

Since many women carry the majority of childcare and household labor in their families, these women face more challenges engaging in their recovery. Services that identify and address these challenges will be essential for meeting recovery goals for many women.



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