

A Guide for Recovering Drug Addicts

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Your first priority: complete abstinence

What is the most important thing for overcoming addiction or alcoholism?

Complete abstinence.

Duh. Total abstinence from drugs and alcohol. That should be priority number one, and this is obvious to any addict or alcoholic who has battled with the disease.

Unbelievably, though, there are “professionals” in the field of substance abuse that feel that we are setting our sites too high by expecting recovering alcoholics to maintain a lifetime of continuous sobriety. These professionals are saying that we need to “rethink our measure of success” and that we should “stop measuring success only in terms of total abstinence from alcohol.”

Dr. Nora Volkow of the NIDA states that “Our expectations for treatment are high” and that we “should also expect that those who are addicted may require multiple episodes of treatment continuing over the course of the disorder. We need to study further how to improve abstinence rates and quality of care.” She goes on to say that we should start incorporating other measures of success, like whether or not a person can stay out of legal trouble, or if they can stay successfully employed.

These are dangerous ideas, in my opinion, and we should not allow ourselves to start down a road where we start to measure success in recovery by anything other than total abstinence. It bears repeating that if you are successful in moderating your alcohol use, then you are not an alcoholic, and therefore do not even apply to this discussion. We are talking about alcoholics here who cannot control their drinking, and therefore need some sort of recovery program in order to maintain any sort of meaningful sobriety.

The question of “measuring success” without using “total abstinence” as the benchmark is a very slippery slope. How easy it would be for me to say “Hey, I only drank 3 beers or less on 90 percent of the days last month!” What kind of recovery is that? If you lower the bar even a little bit, it throws the entire idea of recovery down the toilet. One weekend slip up could erase tons of progress that someone made while they were sober. For an alcoholic, one slip-up could do a lot worse than that, actually. But according to our new measure of success, that one “slip-up” is supposed to be alright? That’s just crazy!

I can sympathize a bit with the treatment industry, because the success rates for maintaining sobriety are [actually pretty bad](#). We all know this and accept it as fact by now. But the world has also come to terms with the fact that addiction and alcoholism is a serious issue, and we know that treatment is an uphill battle...a true struggle for any addict or alcoholic. We know it’s hard, and society is starting to accept that there is probably no magical cure for it.

But that doesn't mean there aren't winners out there. There are thousands of people around the world who are working an active program of recovery and—as a result—are achieving long term sobriety. Real recovery is happening every day. There is hope out there. Anyone can recover if they want to badly enough, and there are many people in recovery who are willing to reach out and help you. If you want it.

Always remember: the most important thing in my recovery is that I do not use drugs or alcohol today. Period.

Stages of recovery

Ernie Larsen has [great insight when he writes about “stage 2 recovery.”](#) This is the idea that recovery is separated into at least 2 distinct stages, one where you are just getting sober and starting to learn how to live in recovery, and then the second stage that represents long term sobriety and continued growth.

Essentially, I tend to believe in Ernie's teaching: that there are 2 stages in recovery. The first is that you have to break through your existing patterns of drinking and drug use and establish some level of short term sobriety. In other words, you have to find a way to get clean and sober long enough to the point where you can start living and thinking again. This is the first part of your journey. It is still possible to relapse further down the road, but that is where the creative theory of recovery comes into play.

The first 2 times I went to a treatment center, I did not make it past this initial stage, and I used drugs immediately after leaving treatment. For whatever reason, I just did not make it over the hump. The third time around, I believe I made it past this stage in a few short months by living in a long term treatment center. For me, long term treatment was my solution for stage one recovery. I couldn't see it happening any other way....I was relatively young and had a whole host of friends that I used drugs and drank with, so I needed particularly drastic action in terms of getting “over this hump.”

Understand that for other people who are in different situations, long term treatment might not be necessary. For me it was. Other people might be able to do other things to get them over this hump. They might do this in a variety of different ways: attending daily AA meetings, being in jail for a few months, staying with supportive family in a safe environment, and so on. I'm not claiming to be an expert on getting people past this initial hump, because I think it will vary from person to person. I used long term treatment to get me there. You might need something else.

The key to achieving *short term* sobriety: overwhelming force

I've written about [overwhelming force](#) before. That's because it is a crucial concept for early recovery.

Regardless of how you choose to get clean and sober, you need overwhelming force. Whatever your short term strategy is to get you through the first few months, you need to pursue it with every single ounce of energy and ambition that you can muster up. This is the whole key.

I would go so far as to argue that it doesn't even matter what method or program you use in the beginning. It makes no difference. Seriously. All that matters is that you pour your heart into it. Give it everything you've got. Remember how heavily the odds are stacked against you and attack your addiction with raw determination. This is the whole secret to achieving short term sobriety. (Notice I said *short term* sobriety).

The whole point here is that you have to make it through this first stage before you can really start to apply the principles of holistic recovery. Just getting your foot in the door and getting a month or two of sobriety under your belt can be a huge challenge. For me, it was the challenge of a lifetime. Nothing I have ever done in life was harder.

But once you've got to this point, where do you want to go with your life? Once you've conquered this first stage, how do you achieve a life of holistic living? Enter the creative theory of recovery.

The creative theory of recovery

From an outsiders perspective, quitting drinking seems like a process of elimination. It's not.

The struggling alcoholic is trying to attain a meaningful life in recovery. Successfully attaining that goal has very little to do with the idea of not drinking. Instead, it is *a creative process*.

Intuitively, the struggling alcoholic knows that this must be the case—because they have tried and failed over and over again to quit drinking. Simply not drinking has never been enough.

The need for a replacement

What do I mean by “creative process?” This is the whole secret to a life in recovery: the addict finds new meaning in their life through the cultivation of positive action. It's not about simply abstaining from chemicals, as that will create a miserable and resentful addict who secretly wishes to get high. It's only a matter of time before someone who is simply abstaining returns to their drug of choice in an effort to self-medicate.

I had to create an entirely new situation in my life in order to overcome drug addiction. Think about it: my entire life revolved around using drugs and alcohol. Either I was getting high on drugs or drinking, or I was working so that I could get the money to do so. This became my routine; my whole meaning for existence. My only thoughts were to use

drugs and alcohol and find the ways and means to get more. My ultimate fantasy was to have an unlimited supply of the stuff.

So think about it: take an addict who is deeply obsessed with getting and using drugs and alcohol, and simply remove those chemicals one day. What are you going to be left with? A shell of a person is one way to say it. I didn't just make a habit of using drugs, I made a lifestyle out of it. And furthermore, I glamorized the thought of being stoned out of my mind—it became a religion of sorts, a (false) spiritual state of being that I was trying to attain. Getting high was my religion, and I worshiped the drugs and the booze. I idolized them. I glamorized them. I lived for them.

For me, the lifestyle that went along with getting drunk and high every day involved 3 major components:

- 1) The job I worked at that could tolerate me in that state of mind
- 2) The group of friends and/or girlfriend that I used and drank with
- 3) My living situation - the apartment complex with roommates and/or neighbors that I also used and drank with

So when I stopped using drugs and alcohol, 3 things happened:

- 1) I stopped worshiping the drugs.
- 2) I stopped associating with all of my old drinking buddies.
- 3) I got out of an unhealthy living situation.

Those are all elimination steps. I got rid of stuff. Note the following 2 things: First of all, this stuff was necessary for me, but addiction is complicated, so other people's solution might be different. For example, there are a number of recovering addicts and alcoholics who did not have to change their living situation at all when they got clean and sober. For them, it wasn't necessary. In my situation, it happened to be an important step. Second, note that doing the 3 things above did *not* insure my success in recovery. There are plenty of people who go to extreme measures and enter long term treatment centers and unfortunately still relapse. Also, I still stand by my opinion that long term treatment still affords the best chances for achieving long term sobriety (but it is by no means a magic bullet).

I had to get rid of a lot of stuff when I quit drinking and using drugs. I quit using booze and chemicals, moved out of an apartment, left a large circle of unhealthy friends, and left a job that accommodated my drinking. That's a lot of stuff to let go of all at once.

Simple elimination is not enough. There's nothing to fill the void, nothing left to engage a person in their daily life. Think about all the hours each day spent obsessing over drugs and alcohol. Consider the hours spent drinking and using with friends and drinking buddies. Think of the time spent actually getting drunk and high.

When you free up all of that time, what are you left with? What are you going to do?
When you stop worshipping drugs and alcohol, what are you going to focus on in the future?
When you walk away from your drinking buddies, who are you going to associate with?

You need a replacement strategy

Most people who first try to quit drinking or using drugs are essentially using behavior modification.

Behavior modification is not effective as a means to recovery. Why not? Because it's not a replacement (creation) strategy. I believe it can only lead to short term sobriety. In the long run, behavior modification falls short because it generally only seeks to eliminate negative behaviors:

- Not going to the bar
- Not going to your old drug dealer
- Avoiding negative influences

and so on.

This is not reinventing yourself. It is not creation. You're just tearing down your old habits. What are you putting up in their place? What are you building for your new life? If you simply eliminate the old stuff, relapse is inevitable. It's just a matter of time. You need a creation strategy.

12 step meetings, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, are one example of a creation strategy: you stop drinking and go to an AA meeting. Then you continue attending meetings, and the fellowship that helped you get sober starts to depend on you to help and guide the newcomers. This is creation, in your own life. It can fill you up, if you allow it to. Reaching out to the newcomer, working with others, showing up and sharing honestly in daily meetings—these are creative actions. They require initiative and positive action on the part of the recovering addict. They are *not* acts of elimination. This is recovery in *action*.

Another example: quitting smoking

Think about cigarette addiction. Quitting smoking is notoriously difficult, because it is primarily an exercise in elimination. When a smoker quits smoking, there is nothing there....I can remember wanting to simply reach my hand out as if it held an imaginary cigarette. This was a crushing withdrawal on several levels, because it is *all* elimination. There is very little to “replace” with. Smoking is social, it is comfortable, and it is ritualistic. Quitting smoking abruptly strips all of those benefits out of your life, with very little to replace them with. It is an exercise in elimination. Very difficult.

Realizing this, I actually did formulate a creation strategy for quitting smoking, and it finally worked for me:

Physically, I replaced cigarettes with toothpicks and sugarless gum.

Socially, I continued to take “smoke breaks” and went outside to socialize with other smokers, even though I did not light up.

On an emotional level, I did some empowering things and set up an exciting reward system for myself to enhance motivation. Notice that these are acts of creation, of building something, of taking action. Something more than just *not smoking*. If you just sit there and *not smoke* all day, you will drive yourself insane to the point of relapse.

So in the smoking example, I finally found success with quitting when I managed to employ a creation strategy. It wasn't enough for me to put down the cigarettes and simply walk away from a lifestyle of smoking....I had to find new meaning, positive action that could fill in that massive void that was left when I could no longer reach for a comforting cigarette.

Filling the void

Perhaps the biggest part of the creation/replacement strategy has to do with spirituality. This is huge. Regardless of your religious beliefs, or how spiritual you were while using drugs and alcohol, there is a big task ahead of you if your goal is to obtain meaningful and long term sobriety.

What exactly is this spiritual task? Quite simply, you must create meaning in your life that exceeds the passion you felt for drugs and alcohol. This *definitely* requires a creation strategy.

For the addict or alcoholic, using drugs or drinking every day filled us up—both emotionally and spiritually. It was a sick way to bring a false sense of fulfillment into our lives. When we get clean and sober, there is a massive void that needs to be filled. This void cannot be filled up with *things*. Nor can it be satisfied through other potentially harmful behaviors, such as with gambling or compulsive eating. This is, in essence, trading one addiction for another. You can imagine that this does not work, and always leads a person back to their drug of choice.

But perhaps the biggest pitfall of all when attempting to fill this void is in pursuing unhealthy relationships. To someone who is new in recovery, getting into a relationship is extremely dangerous, because doing so artificially fills the void that was left when the person stopped using drugs and alcohol. Getting involved in a serious relationship actually functions as a replacement strategy, but it is an extremely dangerous one, because the other person essentially becomes your only purpose in life; your only means of conquering your addiction. It is only when an addict can find spiritual meaning and purpose in their life beyond the new relationship that they can achieve long term sobriety.

So what, then, is the creation strategy?

The creation strategy explained

A creation strategy is about creating a new life for yourself. Does that make it goal-oriented?

Heck yes it does! Setting a goal for yourself and achieving it is the very essence of creation. But what's important here is that you change your thinking; change your mindset. You want to shift from an elimination strategy to an empowering plan-of-action mindset.

The task is not to quit drinking. The task is not to kick drugs. Instead, it is to create a new life in recovery. Start focusing on the positive. Yes, you are going to remain abstinent from chemicals if you do this right. Technically, you are going to quit. You will eliminate something. But the mental shift is important if you are going to enjoy long term sobriety because you are creating a new life for yourself.

When I first got sober, I would wake up and wonder how I was going to make it through the whole day without drinking. That doesn't happen anymore. I wake up excited, with the prospect of a creative life in recovery; of reaching out to help other addicts. That's creation, and it's exciting! It adds purpose to your life—enough to offset the purpose you once felt for getting drunk and high. *You can have this!* It is passion for a life lived sober.

Ask anyone who has several years of clean time or sobriety. Ask them if they are still “quitting drinking,” or if they are now enjoying an awesome life of recovery. You can guess what their answer will be. The alcoholics who are not busy creating positive things in their lives are—unfortunately—the ones who relapse.

Consider the newcomer who is struggling to stay sober. They are going through the motions, avoiding the bars, clinging to their sobriety with their teeth clenched. This solution is behavioral and it won't last. Either they make the transition or they go back to drinking.

Making this transition is commonly referred to as a spiritual experience. It represents the shift from elimination to creation. Here is what it looks like after the shift:

1) *Creating with positive action* - You empower yourself and others through action. You stop hurting and abusing yourself and others.

2) *Complete change in personality* - You no longer obsess over how to medicate yourself. Reduced obsession with self.

3) *Connection with a higher power* - Prayer and meditation. Positive action. Positive guidance for decisions. Daily strength.

4) *From self centered to interest in others* - You start taking a genuine interest in the well being of others, both in and out of recovery

That is what it looks like once you've made the transition. How you go about making this shift is really the focus of this entire website. In my experience, different addicts and

alcoholics have traveled different paths and all made it to a spiritual experience. [Addiction is complicated](#), so the solution is necessarily complicated as well. Furthermore, it's not clear to me yet if any addict [can decide to transform spiritually](#) or not. Some of those I've met in recovery have tried so hard and still failed.

Think “strategy,” not tactics

It can be difficult in early recovery to know what to focus on. Part of the problem is that many of the people who are trying to help you recover are suggesting all sorts of different tactics and tips. For example, they might suggest that you get phone numbers of other people in recovery and call them when you feel like using, or to go to a meeting when you feel an urge coming on.

Now there is nothing wrong with these tactics, and they certainly can be helpful. But the problem is that there are so many tactics being suggested that it can be overwhelming for the newcomer. Wouldn't it be nice to have an overall strategy, one that can give us direction for all of the little decisions that we have to make in our day-to-day lives?

Here are the 3 overall strategies that you can use to guide you in your recovery:

Growth and development

This needs to become a habit....something you look for on a regular basis. Where is the opportunity for me to grow in this situation? What can I learn about myself here?

When I was in early recovery, I thought that the only thing I needed to learn was how not to drink. The idea of learning how “not to” something doesn't make much sense; it is like trying to learn how to “not be overweight.” Obviously the solution is not like this—instead of learning how to abstain from drugs and alcohol, we need to learn how to embrace the creative life in recovery and start living again.

But this wasn't obvious to me at first, I thought the focus was on not drinking and drugging (and in the beginning, this is probably OK). But at some point my sponsor suggested that I go back to college in order to better myself. This was the first decision that I made in a long line of strategic moves towards growth and development.

When we grow in one area of our lives, it strengthens the whole. When we make progress on ourselves in one area, it can lead to confidence and motivation to work on other areas. Personal growth is therefore interconnected and holistic in this way.

Looking back, now it seems obvious that pushing yourself to grow and learn should be an integral part of recovery from drugs and alcohol. But in the beginning it was not that clear to me. The push for personal growth should always be an underlying strategy in the back of your mind.

Seek positive support structures and environments

As an overall strategy, seeking support would include a whole host of things such as:

- 1) Going to meetings, or making a commitment to attend (such as 90 meetings in 90 days)**
- 2) Getting a sponsor and connecting with them**
- 3) Befriending others who are in recovery**
- 4) Changing out old using and drinking buddies for new sober friends in recovery**
- 5) Finding new social environments that support sobriety instead of using**
- 6) For some, finding a new work environment that supports sobriety**
- 7) Choosing to live in long term recovery**

And so on. The idea is to use the overall strategy of seeking supportive environments in order to guide your decision making. You might do everything on that list or you might do none of it. The individual tactics and ideas are not what's crucial here....instead, just focus on making decisions that lead to supportive environments for yourself. At different points in my recovery I used different ideas from that list. Each time I was making a decision to enhance the supportive structure of my recovery.

Take care of yourself - in every way

The overall strategy here is simply one of caring. Care for yourself. Put your health and well-being first. With each decision, ask yourself: "Is this the best choice for me?"

Now at first this might seem obvious but this strategy can become a powerful agent of change. For example, it is this same strategy of caring that eventually led me to give up cigarettes in my recovery. It's also the same overall strategy that has led to my regular exercise habits (I am now an avid runner...this has huge benefits for recovery by the way).

The overall strategy is: "Am I caring for myself?" This can apply to:

- 1) *Physical*** - abstaining from drugs and alcohol. Proper nutrition. Fitness. Quitting smoking. Caring for your physical body.
- 2) *Emotional balance*** - am I engaging in situations where I know I'm going to fly off the handle? Can I find a way to be more emotionally balanced today?
- 3) *Social and relationships*** - are these the best friendships to be cultivating? Do I want to hang around with these people? Are they a positive influence on me?

4) Spiritually - will this decision bring me into alignment with my spiritual beliefs?

To recap on strategies:

Remember these 3 strategies and see if you can apply them to your daily life:

- 1) The push for personal growth and development**
- 2) Seeking out supportive people and environments**
- 3) Taking care of yourself**

Long term recovery requires a holistic approach

The creative theory of recovery contains a holistic approach. Now, I'm not suggesting to treat addiction with holistic medical treatments (such as acupuncture, hypnosis, etc.), but instead that the holistic approach treats the whole person. This means that successful recovery consists of treating a person physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually (we might also add socially).

Most recovery programs contain some or most of these elements. Treating addiction physically will usually start with abstinence. Emotional stability can be achieved over time, and our mental faculties return to us as well. Those in 12 step fellowships, such as AA, benefit from the socializing in AA meetings. And most recovery programs contain either a spiritual or religious element in them as a means to sobriety.

So the holistic approach to recovery is nothing new. But the creative theory of recovery emphasizes the cultivation of these forces in our lives. Even if we are not consciously focusing on this type of development, I would argue that anyone living a successful, long-term recovery is already engaged in this type of holistic approach. Perhaps a recovering addict has been clean and sober for several years and attributes their success to the 12 step program. This is fine, but I would point out that they are also developing in other ways—living a full and balanced life, while progressing in several or all of these holistic categories (maturing emotionally, improving their relationships, completing that college degree, starting an exercise program, and so on).

With the creative theory of recovery, we are not just removing the drugs and the alcohol and expecting the person to live happily ever after. Instead, I'm suggesting that a successful recovery is driven by growth in all areas of a person's life. One popular example of this that I notice in myself as well as in other recovering alcoholics: after a few years of sobriety, a light bulb goes off, and we see a need to quit smoking. Or to go back to school. Or to reconnect with our family. You get the idea.

I would suggest, too, that even 12 step fellowships such as AA and NA fall a bit short of encouraging people to grow and develop outside of their somewhat restricted dogmas. This

is not said to fault those programs in any way, as their singleness of purpose (helping the addict to recover) keeps them from trying to do too many things and thus sacrifice efficiency. In other words, they just help addicts to recover, and nothing else. If they tried to encourage holistic growth in a million different directions, they would become less effective at what they do best.

But some recovering addicts and alcoholics can get stuck in this linear growth. There is a whole world of growth to be had outside of recovery programs in general. Here are some ideas and examples of what can drive the creative life in recovery:

1) *Physical* - Exercise can fight depression and help stimulate endorphins and dopamine production, replacing the high from chemicals. But the physical category can also be important outside of addiction...for example, the number one killer of recovering alcoholics is actually lung cancer....a strong incentive to consider quitting smoking in recovery.

2) *Emotional* - Learning to identify our feelings and communicate them honestly with others is critical to long term success. Doing so prevents the emotional blow-ups that might lead to relapse. Most recovering addicts grossly underestimate the importance of this, under the false idea that “they can handle their emotions.”

3) *Mental* - Recovery is a learning process. We build layers of interconnected knowledge about how we can stay clean and sober, but also in how to live effectively in other areas (such as career, family life, etc.).

4) *Spiritual* - The inner strength that fuels our success. Connection to a higher power. Shift in personality from self centered and self seeking behavior to helpfulness and usefulness. A large percentage of those who do relapse probably do so due to neglect in this area.

5) *Social* - Regular interaction with others on the same path. Identification with other addicts and alcoholics. Important for staying “plugged in” to the recovery mindset. Believe it or not, we can actually forget that we are addicts or alcoholics. Social interaction strengthens our identification with recovery.

Addiction affects the whole person, including each of these areas mentioned. So it naturally follows that any recovery program that seeks to re-create a new life will need to address each of these areas.

I hope this eBook has given you some good strategies for long term sobriety. Feel free to share it with others. Good luck to everyone out there and good luck on your recovery!