



Being “In Recovery”: What Does It Actually Mean?

While individual situations run the gamut from worry about problematic use of substances to those with teen and young adult children who have significant co-occurring issues as well as legal and financial issues, many parents and caregivers have children in “recovery.” There are quotes around the word because “recovery” because each family sees recovery in a different way.

There seems to be a typical progression where families initially struggle to figure out how to get their son or daughter into treatment. Once treatment is completed, whether inpatient or outpatient, the hope is that life will get back to “normal.” Recovery can be synonymous with total abstinence, but not always. Here’s what recovery can look like for typical parents of teens and young adult children:

Everything Has Changed

Nadia talked about her 17-year-old son’s return from rehab as having him in a witness protection program, save for his name. She thought everything would be “fixed” with residential treatment, but quickly learned about the challenges of early recovery. “Andy’s been home about a month, and everything has changed – his school, friends, hobbies, his cell number — everything. When he isn’t in school, he goes to AA meetings and therapy appointments. I think he’s really on board with abstinence, but I have to say all these changes seem so daunting to both of us. While I’m very happy with how he’s doing, I find myself on pins and needles worrying that he’ll relapse. He was really irritable last night and all I could think of is, ‘Is he going to use?’ He told me he was just worried about passing his final exams, but I wasn’t sure.”

Slippery Slopes

“My son has been abstinent from everything for a year after struggling with heroin, which I’m totally grateful for,” Diane shared. “About a month ago though, John told me and his dad that he wants to drink. He’s always liked to go out dancing and says he wants to enjoy a drink every now and then with his friends. He’s 26, so what could I say? I told him I was concerned. I think this is such a slippery slope, but I was glad he was honest with me.”

Motivation Issues

Tom lamented that while his son is not using substances anymore, he doesn’t seem to be able to “get his act together.” “I thought he would jump back into life after rehab, but so far he only has a part-time job and barely makes meetings. I worry about his mood swings and he seems to be sleeping a lot. I’ve encouraged him to see his psychiatrist about his medications – maybe something needs to be adjusted there.”

Dealing with Old Triggers

Debbie said, “My son came home for Easter and I was so excited to see him. He’s really been doing well for the past year – great job, nice girlfriend, has put on weight – he was stick-thin when he first went into treatment, but now he looks amazing and works out all the time. Everything was just great and then he decided to take a shower. I found myself almost panicking as I saw the minutes tick by, and he was still in the shower. I realized that I was triggered by the sound because that was what he used to do when he was using heroin – he would disappear into the bathroom and let the shower run. When he went to treatment, I found a stash of his paraphernalia on the top shelf of the bathroom linen closet, tucked behind some towels. I realized that although he’s been in recovery for a year, I’m still trying to cope with my triggers.”

Coping Skills

Linda offered the following thoughts: “I think ‘recovery’ means learning new coping skills — not only for them, but for us too. I remember going through his belongings and searching his room, always looking for evidence that he was using or not. Although I would feel slightly relieved if I didn’t find anything, I wondered if he was just getting better at hiding things from me. He is living on his own with his girlfriend and I know he’s still smoking marijuana, but it seems more manageable. I would’ve preferred abstinence, but he’s holding down a job – in fact, his boss asked him to house sit for a weekend. That’s a big deal, as that would never have happened a year ago. He’s paying his bills – finally – and doesn’t come to us, the ‘bank of mom and dad,’ always looking for money or to help with problems. It’s taken some time and he seemed developmentally delayed for a while (not able to care for himself like a typical 24-year-old), but things are

improving. When we're together, we don't focus on his substance use like we did when he was living at home, so the conversations are much better."

Keeping Boundaries

Mika said, "I'm not talking to my son now, mostly because I'm afraid of what I might say. He has a full-time job and just completed two more college classes – he got A's in both. His girlfriend is wonderful and very supportive, and he helps around the house – he'll do any chores I ask him to. But last night he put a Nyquil bottle on the counter, saying something about his allergies and problems sleeping. He overdosed on Nyquil a long time ago and I couldn't believe he put it there. I wondered if he was trying to test me to see what my reaction would be. I blew up his girlfriend's phone with text messages and she assured me he isn't using, but I could feel the anxiety and anger bubbling up in my throat. I'll wait a day or two and then try to have a conversation with him about this, but it was so upsetting to me."

Constant Worry

Antonia shared, "My son's recovery is going well, at least I think so. It's been 8 months since he overdosed. I worry, though, because he told me he's going to a concert tonight and, well, everyone knows that there are drugs at concerts. I told him to be safe and he said he would, but I'm going to pee test him anyway when he comes home."

Managing Expectations

Amanda told us that her son is on Vivitrol and hasn't used opiates in over two years; however, he continues to drink and smoke marijuana. "I have come to see recovery as no longer getting phone calls in the middle of the night, not worrying that the mailbox will contain a letter from probation, or that my son can't pay his bills. It isn't the perfect recovery that I imagined, but all of the drama is gone and for that, I'm thankful."

A Weight Lifted

Francis offered, "I think about recovery as being able to smile again — being able to laugh, at least for today. I feel like I don't have to worry as much, but it also feels very fragile. I mean there's no cure and so I worry that he could relapse at any time and then we would be back to ground zero, but for now I can smile."

As you can see from these comments, **there is no single definition of recovery**, as it varies by family and child. In many cases, parents and caregivers are struggling with their old triggers even if their child is totally abstinent. Abstinence may be part of the picture for all substances used or some. In other cases, **any movement toward pro-healthy choices is a win**.

It's helpful to think about recovery as a process, not an end state. It's a series of steps a person takes to make life better on multiple dimensions: physical, mental and spiritual well-being, a sense of purpose and connection, the ability to contribute in a meaningful way and more. Parents can influence this journey using various tools at our disposal such as positive reinforcement of small steps forward, respectful conversations, limit setting and self-care. It also helps to belong to a support group where families feel safe to share their setbacks and successes.

 **Do you identify with any of these stories?**

 **Have you thought about what the meaning of being "in recovery" looks like for your child and family?**

Adapted from Partnership for Drug-Free Kids, "Being 'In Recovery': What Does It Actually Mean?", 2018, Patricia Aussem, LPC, MAC