

Achieving Long Term Recovery

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The following is a guide about how to best achieve long term addiction recovery. Feel free to download the guide, print it out, share it with others, whatever you like.

My belief is that there are basically two separate parts to your recovery: the very early stage where you are scrambling just to stay clean and sober, and long term sobriety, where you are pushing yourself to grow, achieve balance, and overcome complacency.

I have already written extensively about [how to master early recovery](#) from addiction and alcoholism. So this here is a guide on how to achieve long term recovery, and what all is involved in doing so.

As always, you will notice that an holistic approach is emphasized. "Holistic" just means treating the addict or alcoholic as a "whole" person, and not neglecting any one area of their overall health or being.

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First things first: your zero tolerance policy with yourself.

My belief is that before you can even consider yourself to be living in long term recovery, you have to have something down pat with yourself called the "zero tolerance policy."

The zero tolerance policy is the idea that you make a deal with yourself, a commitment of sorts. And that deal is this:

You don't use drugs or alcohol, period.

Pretty simple, right? But that is not anywhere to be found in the 12 steps of AA or NA. It is super important, and some people actually screw it up.

So think about this long and hard and get it straight in your head: you have a new, zero tolerance policy with yourself. You do not allow yourself to use drugs or alcohol, period. You have decided against them, and you are making this policy your number one priority in life.

If someone tries to say that they are no longer a newcomer in recovery, and they do not actually have this mindset straight in their head, then they are lying to themselves. They are still a newcomer, trying to figure things out.

When you enter long term recovery, this mindset, this "zero tolerance policy" is automatic. **You no longer have to think about it.** You no longer have to say, "gee, should I drink a beer tonight?" Your mindset has to be more fixed than that. It has to be a lightning fast reaction when you think of taking drugs or alcohol; you should recoil in horror at the thought of it. This is your zero tolerance policy in action.

You have made a decision that you do not take drugs or alcohol no matter what, and everything in your life has to enter your mind through that filter. If you do not have this mindset, you are probably not living in long term recovery yet.

It has to be automatic. Sobriety should come naturally to you now. And the way you measure this is with your reactions to triggers. If you entertain the thought and have to talk yourself out of it, then that means you are still in a "newcomer mindset." That is **not** the mentality of someone living in long term sobriety.

Now that is not to say that triggers and urges do not exist for someone in long term recovery, because they certainly can still occur. But it is your *reaction* to those triggers and urges that defines the quality of your recovery. If you have the right mindset (one of zero tolerance), then you will **quickly** brush such urges aside, and not dwell on them.

If you dwell on such triggers or urges, they will make you miserable. And that is not the mindset of someone in long term recovery.

This can be practiced as well. You can improve at this skill, of using the zero tolerance policy. Simply **increase your awareness**. Notice if you have a craving or trigger to use or drink. When you do, shut it down immediately. Do not dwell on it. Do not think about how you used to have good times with drugs or booze. Doing so will make you miserable. You have *some* control of your mind, so use it! Shut down those thoughts and move on with your recovery.

This is one baseline for long term sobriety. You have to get this mindset right, or nothing else matters. This commitment to yourself **has to come first**. It has to be the strongest part of your entire life. Do not use drugs or alcohol, no matter what. That is your mantra, for the rest of your life. Keep that number 1, and good things can then happen.

Why this is not step one in AA and NA, I have no idea. Think about it: "Don't use drugs or alcohol no matter what." It makes way too much sense. So direct, powerful, and necessary. Every single person who relapses in recovery violates this mindset.

It is the foundation for recovery. Your mantra for success.

Physical considerations: abstinence, exercise, and nutrition.

My opinion is that recovery from addiction is holistic in nature. That means that you have to recover in many different areas of your life, including:

- * Physical
- * Mental
- * Emotional
- * Spiritual
- * Social

And so on. There are all of these different areas of your life that can be addressed in recovery.

Most recovery programs focus heavily on the spiritual aspect. Their philosophy is that if you can get the spiritual aspect of your recovery in order, then everything else will fall into place.

My opinion (and my experience) is different from that. My experience is that recovery *starts* with the physical aspect.

What does this mean in the real world?

It means that physical abstinence from drugs and alcohol has to be your number one priority. Always.

But beyond that, it means that things such as exercise and nutrition play a bigger role than what most people think. Especially the exercise.

But understand that these are issues dealing with the physical aspects of your recovery. So the general idea is one of health. You want to:

- 1) Abstain from drugs and alcohol and harmful chemicals.
- 2) Put healthy stuff into your body (good nutrition).
- 3) Keep your body in good health (exercise).

These things are, in my opinion, almost fundamental to long term recovery. Why? Because **good health is the main benefit of sobriety**. If you sabotage your health in any way, then sobriety becomes somewhat meaningless.

I had a friend in long term recovery who continued to eat unhealthy meals and smoke cigarettes while still being overweight. His doctor warned him to change his ways: "Quit smoking, start exercising, eat right and lose the weight." He could not do it. He was dead before sixty.

So the main idea here is that these physical considerations regarding your holistic health should be a *core pillar of your long term recovery*. Yes, it is that important.

Keep in mind that this stuff does not have to happen overnight. It takes time to change habits and develop a healthy lifestyle. Give yourself time to ease into these changes.

But *do it*. Ultimately, you need to keep pushing yourself towards better health in recovery. Never fall into the stupid trap of saying "I quit using drugs and alcohol, what more do they want from me?" People do that constantly and justify cigarette smoking, being overweight, poor eating habits, and so on. What is the point? If you want to feel great and live a healthy life, you have to generate the discipline necessary to make these positive changes.

Making these tough changes only hurts for a little while! Just ask anyone who has successfully quit smoking, or lost significant weight, how they feel NOW. They all feel wonderful! These are the real rewards of recovery, when you start pushing yourself to make healthy changes, and so on.

Start with the physical aspects of your recovery, and of your health. They are the most important, because once your body fails physically, it's over!

Managing your emotional state.

Managing your emotional state in long term recovery is obviously important, as anyone who flies off the handle or gets too stressed out is apt to relapse. Pretty much anyone who has ever relapsed can tell you, when they came to that moment where they finally picked up a drink or a drug, their emotions were out of control. It was more than a mental relapse. It was an emotional relapse.

So it is critical that you learn how to manage your emotions in recovery. In long term recovery, you should get to a place where you never let yourself get too worked up over anything. Now that does not mean that you will never get upset again, it just means that you need to have more control over your reactions.

If you get to a point and say "screw it" and take a drink or a drug, then obviously there is a problem there, and you let your emotions get the better of you.

So the question is, how can we manage our emotional state in long term recovery?

The answer is necessarily complex. Yes, you can definitely get better control over your emotions in recovery, but it does take work, and it takes an holistic approach. If you master your emotions then you have mastered recovery. Therefore, it really is a lifelong learning process that you never fully grasp in its entirety. We are always learning more about ourselves in recovery.

If you follow the strategies laid out here then you will be well on your way to getting better control of your emotions. For example, using an holistic approach and incorporating regular exercise can make a huge difference in your emotional well being. People who never exercise might find this hard to believe. But those who have made exercise a regular habit know that it definitely helps them to smooth out their emotional state, and can become a quick and easy outlet when they have too much anger, frustration, or even boredom in their life.

Another example involves the strategies for socializing in recovery. Obviously, if you hang around with people who tend to create chaos in their life, then your emotional state will likely reflect some of that. But if you hang around people who are cool and calm and collected all the time, this too will rub off on you.

And so on. Managing your emotional state demands an holistic approach, just like recovery does. And it helps to keep some awareness about your emotional state, simply to have a barometer of how you are doing and how you are feeling. If you become frustrated, angry, or drained lately then you know that you have some changes to make in your life.

Some people in early recovery do not have any awareness about their emotions. They might get upset and quickly react to things without even realizing that they are agitated and emotional at the time. This is a poor approach that will eventually lead back to relapse.

Therefore, in long term sobriety, the key is to have a sharp awareness about your emotional state, and use it as a guide to help spur you into action.

The point is not to try and directly manipulate your emotions. Instead, live the best life that you can in recovery, keep taking positive action, and use your emotional state to help guide you to make corrections.

Socializing with peers in long term recovery.

In early recovery, I personally had a mix of good influences and bad influences in my life. What happened over the next few years was that I slowly learned how to edge the bad influencers out of my life.

That might sound terrible, as all of these people were my close friends at one time. But the reality is that they were no good for me, and would have eventually led me back to relapse.

This is especially difficult for younger people to do but the end result is always the same. You absolutely have to get the negative people out of your life if you want to make it in recovery.

In long term recovery, you will notice that people do not have dozens of negative influencers in their life, nor do they associate with people who are always creating chaos. They have nudged such people out of their lives in order to strengthen their own recovery.

To be honest, I never had to do this directly. Friends of mine who continued on a negative path drifted away from me on their own. It just happened. I did not really have to take much of an active role in telling anyone to stay away. In only one case did I tell someone that I had to keep my distance due to their continuing drug use.

For me, I just knew that I could not continue to be around someone if they were using drugs or alcohol. I missed that life, to some extent, and could see myself slipping back into it way too easily.

Plus, I noticed that when I reminisced about the good times in my addiction, I become miserable from it, because I was no longer using. So it was pointless to remind myself of the "good old days." Only allow yourself to remember the good times with drugs if you plan to go back to them. Otherwise, shut it down the second you realize you are doing it.

So my strategy for socializing with peers in recovery has simply been a reflection of what I want in my life, and what I want for myself. I stay away from negative influences and I try to spend time with positive people. It really is that simple but to actually arrange your life that way can be difficult, at least in early recovery.

If you are into 12 step meetings then you can certainly find some positive people in the fellowship to hang around with. But the same can happen in other places, such as at a church or even in your workplace.

They have a cliché in recovery: "Stick with the winners." Good advice, and simple. If you are serious about your recovery then you should gravitate towards people who are "winning" in recovery, and in life.

Purge the negative people from your life. You deserve better.

The continuous quest for spiritual growth.

When I was in early recovery, I pushed myself hard to seek spiritual wisdom, and to make spiritual growth. Later on in my recovery, I stopped pushing myself so hard on what I thought were "spiritual" materials (such as books) and instead was taking a more holistic approach to my recovery.

This led me to a revelation: our definition of "spiritual" is way too narrow.

What most of us think of as being "spiritual" is probably too narrow of a definition in our minds. I found that when I expanded that definition to encompass other things, my life got better and better, and I slowly gained new perspective.

For example, most people don't see a jogger outside and think "Wow, there goes someone who is deep in meditation." But to be honest, I believe running is on par with almost any other form of meditation, and has almost all of the same benefits. The freedom of movement, the deliberate breathing, taking in the countryside, the list goes on and on. It is a moving meditation for some people that has no other equal.

And maybe running is not your thing, and that is just fine. The point is, you are probably thinking of your own spirituality in much too narrow terms.

Stop for a moment and think about what "spiritual" means to you. What all does it entail?

Now, realize that spirituality is bigger than that. It is broader than that. Stop limiting yourself.

Should you pray every day?
Should you go back to church?
Should you seek a higher power, when you do not yet believe?
Should you read books on spirituality or religion?
Should you read a daily meditation book and call it good?
Should you meditate or practice Yoga or Tai Chi as part of your spirituality?
Should you abandon all of those ideas and instead find your own path?

Obviously there are no right answers, except for the ones that help you to stay clean and sober.

Do not place limits on yourself in your recovery. Do not think that you lack in spiritual growth just because you do not fit into some definition of it that you have in your head.

Keep one suggestion in mind:

* If you are helping other people in any way, then you are on a "spiritual" path. Take that and grow from there. Keep seeking, but do not belittle yourself just because you do not fit your own idea of a "spiritual guru."

Seeking higher education?

I was about a year into my recovery when my sponsor urged me to go back to school.

"Why?" I argued. "Am I not doing enough in my recovery? I thought I was on the right path."

He countered with "Sure you are, but you need to go back to school. That is part of your recovery. You dropped out of college, now go finish it."

And so I reluctantly did. I am glad that I did it, too. But at first I was scared to do so, and thought that it would complicate my recovery efforts. I thought it might sabotage my recovery or stress me out to be back in school.

I do not think that everyone needs to go to school or seek higher education in long term recovery. However, if your addiction caused you to stop in your educational path, then you almost certainly should go back and finish what you started.

In addition to that, I would also point out that higher education goes hand in hand with recovery from addiction. I initially thought that the two would make a poor combination, and that the "stress of school" would interfere with learning about addiction and recovery, but it turns out that this is not the case.

Education is a positive influence. This is universal. If you are learning, it is helping your recovery, even if it is indirectly.

So seeking higher education might not be for everyone, just like exercise might not fit in with everyone's recovery program either. But it is a positive action you can take, and everyone should at least consider it. If you have the means to seek more education, it can (in my opinion) only help your recovery.

Creating your future versus living passively

I have already written extensively about [how to avoid living passively](#) but I will touch on it here again (follow the link to get a detailed guide on it).

Basically, if all you do in your recovery is come home every day from a job that does not inspire you and sit in front of the television, then you are living passively. You are just reacting to live instead of creating with real action.

In order to avoid living passively you have to ask yourself "What do I really want?"

And then you have to go out and get it. Make it happen.

When you first get into recovery, and everything is still very fresh and new, you might not be living a passionate, goal-oriented life right off the bat. That is fine.

But at some point in your recovery, you should probably transition to purposeful living. My hope for you would be that you decide what you really want out of your life, and start taking action in order to achieve it.

People often make excuses about why they are not chasing their dreams or trying to pursue a better life for themselves. To those folks I would like to point out: "Hey...time is gonna pass anyway. Where do you want to be in 5 years? In ten years? Still sitting in front of the television every night, complaining about your coworkers? etc."

When you live passively, that is the outcome you get. Or, you get something very similar to that, where you look back on your life and wonder "How did I get here? Why am I so unlucky?" and so on.

The answer to this kind of problem is to get creative. Creative recovery is all about creating the life you really want to live. Believe it or not, it can be difficult to figure out what you really want in life. Don't beat yourself up if you don't know right away. It might take months or even years for you to find your path.

But don't accept the default, where you coast through life mindlessly and then look back in 5 years and say "how is it that I am still pretty much stuck where I was before?"

Living passively has no place in long term recovery. Instead, figure out what you really want, embrace your goals, and start living with some real purpose.

When does long term recovery start and early recovery end?

The answer to this is debateable, but I will give my opinion:

Early recovery is defined as learning how to live clean and sober. Long term recovery is defined as pushing yourself to grow as a person.

Of course there is some overlap. But my thought is that when I had 90 days sober, for example, I was not living in "long term recovery." The reason is because I was still figuring out how to stay clean and sober on a day to day basis. Not only that, but I would say I was still struggling here and there with triggers, urges, and thoughts of using or drinking.

Now those things can still happen in long term recovery. But the difference is that now my response to them has long been automatic. I know what to do with those feelings, triggers, urges, or emotions. My response is automatic now and it is no longer a challenge or a mystery as to how I am going to make it through the rest of the day without using drugs.

Long term recovery is when you confidently say to yourself "OK, I now know how to live clean and sober. what next?"

The "what next" is, in my opinion, the holistic and personal growth that we need to push ourselves to do in long term recovery.

The "what next" is the stuff we have to push ourselves to do in order to overcome complacency so that we do not relapse at some point.

Long term recovery is about personal growth. And it is easy to coast, and not really be growing. So, you have to push yourself to keep growing.

Holistic health is where we find our next growth experience. Healthier relationships. Getting into shape. Quitting bad habits. More education. Exercise. Spirituality. Seeking a spiritual path. Helping others. And so on. These are all parts of our emotional, physical, spiritual, and mental health.

Long term recovery is about improving our lives in all of these areas.

A common misconception: What got you clean and sober will not keep you clean and sober.

This is a very subtle idea but it is of vital importance in my opinion.

So many people in recovery miss this concept. It is not taught anywhere else, as far as I can tell, yet I see people relapse over and over again who fail to act on this information:

What got you sober will not keep you sober.

That's right, you have to change and evolve and grow in your recovery.

Simple as that.

Many people get stuck in early recovery after they find a pattern that seems to be working for them. "If it a'nt broke, don't fix it" is a common excuse for not pushing yourself to grow.

Well, guess what? Complacency is your biggest enemy in long term recovery, not resentments or triggers or urges or any of that stuff. Nope, the thing you have to watch out for in long term recovery is in getting too lazy, and in not pushing yourself to grow or learn in some way.

If you work a traditional program of recovery, you can still push yourself to keep moving forward within that framework. It would probably be a bit easier to do so if you expand your horizons a bit, and consider other forms of holistic health as being a major part of your recovery as well, but either path will actually work. The key is that you are always pushing yourself to do more, learn more, and to tackle that next challenge in your life.

When you start to coast, you are in trouble.

And coasting is easy to do, and it is easy to justify, because we know what got us sober, and it becomes automatic to keep doing those things. But we have to do more.

So what does "more" consist of? The other concepts in this article point toward just about every option. Start with holistic health, and also with helping others. Push yourself hard in those 2 areas and you are bound to stay on a path of personal growth. This is the key to long term success. Keep growing and keep challenging yourself.

Why meeting attendance is not enough in the long run.

I have nothing against 12 step meetings unless a person is using them as a crutch. It is easy to fall into a pattern where you go to meetings on a regular basis and use them as a way to scrape by in your recovery. People do this in different ways: some people vent at meetings, others use them to boost their ego, and so on.

I am not saying that meetings are bad, or that you should avoid them necessarily. What I am saying is that if you rely on meetings for your sobriety, then you are doing something wrong. Real recovery is out there and it does not depend on regular meeting attendance.

If you ask a dozen of the oldtimers in AA some of them will agree with this. The magic is not in using meetings as a crutch. I promise.

Sure, you can still benefit from 12 step meetings. Many people do. But a dependency on meetings, in the long run, may not be serving you as well as you might think.

The trap that I worry about is when people do not do enough outside of the meetings to sustain their recovery, and they hang on to their sobriety by the skin of their teeth. They believe that the meetings are keeping them sober. They believe that their meeting attendance will make or break their recovery. That is the trap that you need to watch out for.

In long term recovery, you will not be dependent on meetings to keep you sober. If you are, then start employing creative recovery strategies found here until you break the dependency. Feel free to keep attending 12 step meetings...just don't depend on them for your recovery.

A necessary foundation to move into long term sobriety.

Everyone pretty much starts recovery from a blank slate. They do not know how to live, and they need help.

In order to build a necessary foundation to move into long term recovery, you have to ask for help. It is a learning process.

And, it takes time.

Do not expect to become some recovery guru overnight. Better to never expect it at all, and stay humble enough to keep learning. Stay grateful for the sobriety that you have gained. Hang on to it desperately.

For me, I had to live in long term rehab for almost 2 years, building my foundation in early recovery. I was honestly scared to leave. Some of us move quicker than others, I suppose. But keep in mind that I have watched thousands of people around me who have relapsed, and precious few have remained clean and sober with me over the last decade. I can count them on one hand, actually.

So what does it mean to "build a foundation" in early recovery? For me it meant:

* Massive commitment to myself, that I would not use drugs or alcohol no matter what.

* Taking massive action by living in long term treatment, and following through with the program and the rules there.

* Actually taking suggestions and doing what successful people told me to do. I did not want to go back to work, but someone told me to do it. I did not want to go back to college, but someone told me to do it. I did not want to get a job at a rehab, but someone told me to do it. All suggestions from people I looked up to. And I am grateful that I followed through on every one of them.

I would argue that early recovery need not be about "finding your own path." Instead, you would do well to simply do what you are told by people you trust.

Long term recovery, on the other hand, is where you start calling the shots, and using your own intuition, spiritual guidance, and growing experience in your recovery.

But you need the foundation first. And you get it by asking for help, and taking some suggestions.

Relapse prevention done right is an holistic approach.

The idea of relapse prevention in early recovery is a bit of a joke. If you want relapse prevention in early recovery then I suggest you live in a treatment center. Seriously!

On the other hand, things get much more complicated when you are successful at staying clean and sober on a day-to-day basis, and your only real stumbling block becomes laziness and complacency. How do you do relapse prevention in long term recovery?

My answer is that you use an holistic approach.

That just means that you seek to grow as a "whole" person. Do not neglect any aspect of your health.

So you might, at various times in your recovery, focus on improving your:

- * Physical health – through exercise, nutrition, quitting smoking, etc.
- * Emotional health – through managing your emotions (and possibly your relationships!).
- * Spiritual health – through seeking, helping others, and exploring holistic growth.
- * Educational/mental – through learning, seeking higher education, etc.
- * Social – through interacting with others in recovery, meeting new positive influences, helping others, etc.

And so on.

Key point: none of this stuff will make much difference in early recovery (in my opinion). To me, this is the wrong time to focus on holistic health. In early recovery, you need focus on sobriety, period.

Later on, as you enter long term recovery, it is then that you start to think about and consider a more holistic path.

If you push yourself to improve in any or all of these areas, your recovery will become more powerful as a result.

Relapse prevention is not a gimmick. It is personal growth. And the way that you grow as a person is in all areas of your life (hopefully!).

Do not shut yourself off to the possibility of growth in one area. Don't say "Oh, I am a smoker for life, no fixing it." Or don't say "Oh, I will always have chaos in my relationships, there is nothing to be done about it." When you close the door to growth in one of these areas, then you allow the possibility of relapse to gain a foothold in your life.

Strengthen your recovery by staying open to new growth experiences. Don't want to face something? It is probably the very thing that will strengthen your recovery the most, if you face it.

Leaving bad habits behind.

Some people want to avoid looking at the negative parts of their life, and argue that they only want to focus on "positive growth" in their recovery. Why look to eliminate the bad, when they can instead focus on creating more good things, right?

Wrong.

Eliminating bad habits is really important in your recovery.

Why?

Because it is a shortcut to personal growth. Let's take a look at this idea.

If you happen to have a bad habit in your life, one that is holding you back or keeping you from enjoying your best life in recovery, then that is the obvious focal point for your next thing to work on in your life. Let's say you smoke cigarettes for example, and have been doing so ever since you were wrapped up in your active addiction. This is the perfect example for a huge gain in personal growth. If you talk with health experts, doctors, or the U.S. government, all 3 will tell you that quitting smoking is the most important thing that you can do for your health. Period.

So if you happen to smoke, then this is a huge growth opportunity.

But it doesn't have to be smoking. It could be unhealthy eating habits, for example. Or any other behavior that it is a negative influence in your life.

They say you have to "clear away the bad to make way for the good." They are absolutely right in this. If you eliminate your bad habits then it will empower your recovery on a whole new level, allowing you to focus on higher level goals later on.

Imagine, for example, that you are an overweight smoker who is now in recovery and you never exercise. Say that you quit smoking, start exercising, and get back to a healthy weight. What happens next?

What happens next is amazing. Because you had the discipline to eliminate all of those bad habits, you now have the discipline to tackle just about any goal you might desire. It becomes much easier now to go after that job you really want, go back to college, or do whatever challenge it is that you've always dreamed of.

Creating the discipline to remove bad habits in your life makes way for tremendous growth opportunities.

But of course, you have to actually do this stuff and follow through with it in order to reap the benefits....

Often underestimated: exercise and its impact on recovery.

Believe it or not, there are some addiction recovery programs that focus solely on exercise as a means of recovery. That's it. How could this possibly work, you ask?

Because it works!

Now obviously this does not work like magic for everyone, but it is more powerful than most people give it credit for.

The problem is, most people are too lazy to put forth the sort of effort that is needed to really reap the benefits of vigorous exercise.

It is almost impossible to describe exactly how regular, vigorous exercise can benefit a person in recovery from addiction. Suffice it to say, those who do it on a regular basis would never dream of going without it, and those who have never been in a habit of regular exercise in recovery tend to dismiss the idea entirely.

What does that tell you?

It should tell you that there is a magic secret in recovery that no one wants to hear, because it is a lot of hard work and you have to put forth serious effort.

But it should also tell you that the benefits that you get out of vigorous exercise are going to be equal to the effort that you put into it. All of those folks who work out hard and would never dream of going without it, they cannot all be wrong. The stuff really work and it really does make you feel great, on a number of different levels.

The problem is, in my opinion, that getting started is hard. If you work out hard and vigorously, as I am suggesting, then it will be hard or even painful for the first few months of doing so. The benefits do not all kick in right away. Some of them kick in later on, after you have been whipped into shape for 6 months, and you can now enjoy a vigorous workout without feeling so much pain and discomfort any more. That is the real breakthrough, and it occurs when you are actually fit and in shape and have put in the effort to get there. That is when a vigorous workout can lift your spirits and change your whole day for the better.

Everyone underestimates exercise as a recovery tool because they are inherently lazy. The people who do not dismiss it are those folks who exercise vigorously on a regular basis. Do not make the mistake of thinking that exercise is easier for some people! Put forth the effort and get into shape if you want the benefits, and realize that other people have done the same.

Achieving a balanced lifestyle.

Part of the transition from early recovery to long term recovery is about achieving balance. Why is this the case?

The reason for this is because early recovery is all about focus. You have to put all of your effort into learning how to live clean and sober while engaging with various support systems. But later on in long term recovery, you will no longer rely as heavily on those early support systems, and you will have learned the basics of how to live clean and sober.

So what has to happen is that you must shift to a balanced lifestyle in long term recovery.

The way that this happens most smoothly is when you are pursuing personal growth in various areas of your life, and you make a conscious effort not to neglect any one area too much.

This can lead to balance in your life, and also help to prevent relapse.

Again, it is all about holistic growth. If you cling to spirituality, but neglect your physical health, then your recovery will fail eventually. Likewise, if you cling to 12 step meetings as your primary solution and fail to grow in other areas of your life, you put your recovery at risk as well.

Balance is not something that you necessarily have to focus on achieving, unless you notice that your life is becoming heavily unbalanced in some way. Keeping a keen awareness of how you spend your time and where you put your effort is important. If you continue to push yourself to achieve personal growth and focus on your overall health, then balance should come naturally in long term recovery.

You might also ask people who are close with you if you have doubts: "Do you think my life is out of balance?" The obsessed mind cannot always see what others find so obvious, so it can help to ask for this sort of feedback.

Again, strive for personal growth and balance should take care of itself. Lack of balance is a warning sign that you need to fix something.

Having fun in long term recovery.

Again, this is not necessarily something that you have to actively pursue. It should happen naturally as a result of your growth experiences and interactions with others.

If you are never having any fun in your recovery, then that is an obvious sign that something needs to change.

Keep in mind that when you are in early recovery, your idea of what is "fun" is probably still undergoing radical changes. When we are in early recovery, addicts and alcoholics normally cannot really have "fun" at all unless they are using their drug of choice. Their addiction makes them have to self medicate just to be able to have the potential to experience any fun.

But as they stay clean and sober, their idea of "fun" will change over time. Obviously, it is no longer about using their drug of choice. Instead, fun will come from growth experiences, from facing and overcoming challenges, and from interacting with and helping other people.

When you stay clean and sober, life becomes fun again, without having to create intensity all the time. You relearn how to appreciate the simple things in life. That is when life gets good again, and happiness returns. You can learn to enjoy yourself and be content without having to push yourself to extremes.

So again, if you are pursuing holistic health and pushing yourself to grow in recovery, then fun will take care of itself. You will look back one day at your whole recovery and realize that your life is a blast now. It really does get that good!

Insurance against relapse: helping others in recovery.

This is the most powerful strategy in recovery, and everyone reading this should act on it in some way.

You have to help others in recovery. To ignore this idea is too dangerous. If you embrace this idea it practically insures your success in recovery.

Helping others in recovery is the best insurance against relapse. Period.

Now you could do this in many ways, and if you are living in long term recovery, then chances are good that you have been exposed to some of those ways already. Two of the most popular ways are to sponsor newcomers in recovery or to attend 12 step meetings and share your experience there. Either one of those suggestions are quite powerful if used properly.

But there are other ways of helping people in recovery that do not directly involve the 12 step program. For example, I work in a local substance abuse facility and I also connect with people via this recovery website. Both outlets have allowed me to help others in recovery, and neither one directly involves the 12 step program.

It is all up to the individual, of course. Find a way to help others with their recovery and you will benefit tremendously. If you want to avoid 12 step programs in doing this, it can be done, but you might have to dig a little deeper for the proper outlet.

Making goals and achieving them

Some people think that goal-oriented living is a poor match for long term recovery. I disagree.

I believe that setting and achieving goals is perfectly suited to the recovering addict and alcoholic in long term recovery. One reason is because we all have to start our recovery by setting and achieving goals. There is pretty much no way around this. Early recovery is focused very much on goal-oriented progress.

And so this translates very well into long term recovery. And, as pointed out before, your goals will change over time (what got you sober will not keep you sober).

So someone with 10 years in recovery should have very different goals from someone who only has 90 days sober. Continuous growth in recovery should result in new goals for each person, the longer they stay sober.

The amazing thing about recovery is that your growth is cumulative. Each goal that you achieve becomes a platform to reach your next milestone. This is especially true when you consider the holistic health approach to recovery. Every time you make positive changes in your life, it has a positive effect on your recovery as a whole, allowing you to make even more positive changes down the road.

I think there are 2 possible ways that people might tackle the idea of goals in recovery:

- 1) wrong way = set a bunch of goals all at once, and not really achieve any of them fully.
- 2) right way = figure out your most important goal, then achieve it fully. Master it. Then set another one.

I floundered around for a while in early recovery until I decided that I needed the narrow-minded focus that was necessary to really master one goal at a time. I quit smoking cigarettes, and used all of my energy and resources to do it. Nothing else mattered.

After that, I decided to start exercising.

So now I was clean and sober, I had finally quit smoking, and now I was starting to exercise.

One goal at a time. Master each, then move on.

From there, I have always worked with one deliberate goal in my life. Something significant and hard to achieve.

One thing at a time, rather than a bunch of smaller goals. Just my philosophy.

Finding purpose and vision in recovery

This is one that you have to let happen, rather than seeking it out. You cannot force yourself to find your true purpose in life. It just comes to you after you put in the effort to keep growing and learning.

Your vision for long term recovery will come to over time. Do not force it. Instead, follow the strategies given here for pursuing holistic health, and try to find your own unique way to help others in recovery.

If you stay open and keep pushing yourself to grow, then a strong purpose and a clear vision will eventually reveal itself to you in your recovery. Do not expect it or put a time frame on it. You may be clean and sober for many years before you find your "true calling" in recovery. All well and good. Let it come in its own time.

My belief is that every person in recovery has a gift for the world. Every person has a unique set of talents that they can use to help others with in some way. Some people may have to develop these talents, refine them, tease them out during their early years in recovery. But eventually they will find a way to give back to the recovery community in a way that empowers them in their own recovery. This is how it works, recovery come full circle.

Your purpose and your vision in recovery will come to you because of your personal growth. Put in the work to improve yourself and your life, and your life will acquire purpose all on its own.

Pushing yourself to grow in recovery

So then the answer should become clear enough at this point: keep taking positive action, and keep pushing yourself to grow in your recovery.

Holistic health should be a natural starting point for new growth experiences.

Prioritize and find your next big move. What is the one thing you could change that would have the biggest impact on your life right now? Do that. Do it with all of your focus, and master it. Then move on to the next big change.

You can either live this way, or you can stagnate. You can either push yourself to keep growing, or you can coast.

One path leads to relapse. The other leads to an awesome life in recovery.

Put in the work, reap the rewards. Simple as that. No magic formula. No secret to recovery. It takes hard work. Make the effort and you will be rewarded. It really is that simple.

So now then: What do you need to do to start living your best life in long term recovery?

* Master the basics. Do what is necessary to stay clean and sober on a day to day basis. Master this.

* Prioritize. Find the next big change in your life and tackle it with all of your energy. Master it fully. Conquer the goal completely.

* Find your next big goal and repeat the process. Keep pushing yourself to improve in your life and take positive action. Stay open to new growth experiences in areas you might be neglecting.

If you found this guide helpful, please feel free to share it with others.

Recommended resources

These are all books that I have read and used to great effect on my journey in recovery. If you found the information here helpful at all, then you would probably benefit from reading some of these books as well.

[Codependent No More](#) by Melody Beattie – The definitive guide to read if you are the friend, family member, or loved one of someone who is struggling with addiction or alcoholism.

[Stage II Recovery](#) by Earnie Larsen – Talks about the idea that we can continue to grow in our recovery after we have mastered the basics of staying clean and sober.

[Creative Recovery: A Complete Addiction Treatment Program That Uses Your Natural Creativity](#) by Eric Maisel – this book does not align perfectly with my own ideas about creative recovery, but it is pretty close, and offers a unique alternative to 12 step based approaches.

[The Zen of Recovery](#) by Mel Ash – Awesome book if you are the least bit intrigued by zen buddhism.

[The Tao of Sobriety: Helping You to Recover from Alcohol and Drug Addiction](#) by David Gregson – Great book if you are interested in Taoism and you are in recovery.

[Conversations With God](#) by Neale Donald Walsch – an excellent resource if you struggle with the higher power concept in any way.

[The Prayer of Jabez](#) by Bruce Wilkinson – One of the best books out there for Christians to read if they are interested in taking action and getting results. Really inspiring, short read.

[The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment](#) by Eckhart Tolle – This book introduced me to the idea that I was not my mind. Very, very powerful. A must read.

[Personal Development for Smart People: The Conscious Pursuit of Personal Growth](#) by Steve Pavlina – Extremely practical and inspiring. No fluff or filler, very actionable book.