

Creative Recovery Action Guide

www.spiritualriver.com

Patrick Meninga

This is an action guide for recovery from drug addiction and alcoholism. Try it out and see if it works for you. The techniques listed here are proven to work for the author, and they may or may not work for you too.

Recovery is like that: you will find success stories out there from addicts and alcoholics using very, very different methods of recovery. This is normal, and should be expected.

For example, take religion. As a recovery path, it does not work for everyone. But it does work for some people.

Or, take the 12 step program. Again, it works for some, but not for all. Recovery is like that. It is a **testing process**. You have to try things out and see what works for you.

They even tell you this in programs such as AA and NA: "**Keep what you need and leave the rest.**" The idea is the same regardless of what recovery method you choose.

So what follows is an action guide. This is simply what actions worked for the author. Yes, that means there is some serious bias here. But it worked for one person, and it could work for you too. You could certainly do much worse than to implement the ideas and strategies that follow.

Why not give it a shot? If you have tried other recovery methods and failed, then you have nothing to lose. Recovery is an iterative process of learning. Keep trying new things, and see what sticks for you. This workbook is simply a **list of new actions for you to try**. They may or may not work for you. They did, in fact, work for me. And thus, I believe strongly in them.

I was a hopeless drunk and a hopeless drug addict, and now I have been clean and sober for over a decade. These are the actions I took. If you are struggling in your recovery, I suggest you follow them too. Good luck.

In this guide, we differentiate between early recovery and long term recovery, as I believe the necessary actions are quite different.

For me, these are the critical actions I took in **early recovery** (first 2 years or so for me...that time frame might vary for other people though):

- * Surrendered.
- * Went to long term treatment.
- * Dropped all of my old friends, using buddies, and drinking partners.
- * Got involved with sponsorship and 12 step meetings.
- * Went back to work.
- * Went back to school (college).
- * Pushed myself to explore spirituality in my life.
- * Pushed myself to read more recovery literature.
- * Pushed myself to write about recovery in my life (journaling + step work).
- * Made a plan to leave long term rehab and move in with a "safe" recovering addict.

The critical actions I have taken in **long term recovery** have been:

- * Physical exercise.
- * Dropped unhealthy habits (smoking).
- * Helping others in recovery.
- * Pushed myself toward better health.

My opinion is that long term recovery starts as soon as staying clean and sober becomes fairly automatic for you. For most people, this is going to be somewhere in the 1 year to 2 year range.

Are these the exact actions that you need to take in order to recover? Not exactly. But many of the ideas behind these actions could certainly benefit anyone in recovery. Therefore, what follows are suggestions in each category. I would urge everyone to actively pursue growth in these areas, as continuous growth is the key to success in long term recovery.

Surrender

What action I took – At some point I finally stopped struggling with trying to control my drug and alcohol use. This was my moment of surrender. I have not used drugs or alcohol since that moment.

The action I took was actually a non-action. This makes it a bit tricky. I am not so sure that you can actually "decide" to surrender to your addiction. I am sure some would argue that it **is** a decision. For me, it just happened. I had enough, finally, and something fell away from me. That part that struggled to control my drug and alcohol use is what fell away.

The actions that I took to get to this point were simply to continue using drugs and alcohol, and suffering all sorts of consequences in my life. Eventually I got to a point where drug and alcohol use was no longer fun. In my denial, I tried to convince myself that it was still fun, and that the good times could still be had when I was lucky enough to strike the proper combination of chemicals in my body.

But the truth is that I was only "happy" when getting drunk and high **for a few hours each week**, and maybe even less than that. But my brain stubbornly held on to the good memories of when using drugs was still fun. My denial kept me from seeing that 99 percent of the time, I was miserable.

And I had convinced myself that I could not possibly be happy without medicating myself.

So the action I took was to **break through my denial**. I realized and fully **admitted to myself** that the fun times were over. I could not recapture them.

What I suggest you do – My suggestion to you if you are still using drugs and alcohol is to break through your denial. First, acknowledge that it does exist. I did this before I was willing to get help, so I know it can be done. You can admit that you have a problem but still be too afraid to take action. Second, try to work through your denial by **getting honest with yourself**. How many hours each week are you actually feeling happy due to your drug and alcohol intake? If you honestly measure it and make note of how often you are happy, then you will be amazed at the result.

If you are happy getting drunk and high for more than 10 hours each week then I say: keep doing it! Why stop? But the truth is that anyone who is actually addicted is miserable 99 percent of the time. So get honest with yourself and actually measure how much "fun" drinking and using drugs really is.

Don't scold yourself or beat yourself up over this. Simply observe yourself. Watch yourself. Watch how happy you are and take note of how long you stay "happy" when self medicating. Does it last all day? For an hour? For less than that? Be honest. You are doing this for you, and only for you. The answers don't matter to anyone else except for yourself. Be honest enough to find out how well the drugs or alcohol really are working.

Treatment

What action I took – I went to 2 rehabs before I was truly ready to stop using. I was still in denial and I had not surrendered yet. Therefore, neither treatment worked for me, even though they were reputable treatment centers.

Years later I finally broke through my denial and agreed to go to a third treatment center. This worked for me because **I was ready** to stop this time. I checked into a detox and residential program, stayed for about 2 weeks, and then moved into a long term treatment center.

Key point: I was never willing to go to **long term** rehab in the past, even though therapists and counselors recommended that I do so. When I finally surrendered fully, I became willing to attend long term, and stayed there for 20 months.

No rehab is perfect, but if you actually break through your denial then pretty much any treatment center will be able to help you equally well. That is my opinion, but I see evidence of it over and over again. *Expensive rehab centers do not fare better than cheap or even free ones.* The quality of the treatment matters very little. The level of surrender in the person is all that matters.

What I suggest you do – I suggest that you go to treatment and use it as a tool to help you get control of your life again. If you have tried treatment in the past and failed to stay clean, then I suggest you step up to more intense levels of treatment. So for example, if outpatient treatment or counseling fails for you, then try inpatient residential treatment. If that fails then try long term. If you are not willing to step up to more intense treatment, I would argue that you are not truly willing to dedicate your life to recovery, which is what it takes for a real addict or alcoholic to overcome addiction. This is especially true in early recovery. Full commitment is necessary.

Friends & relationships

What action I took – I made a clean break from all of my friends that I used drugs and alcohol with in my addiction, including my girlfriend. This was extremely difficult for me but very necessary. The people I used with were a huge part of my life and of my addiction. After my moment of surrender, I never saw any of them again. This was by design, because I moved into long term treatment, and made new friends immediately upon doing so.

What I suggest you do – I suggest that you do much the same. If you have people that you use drugs or alcohol with, and you suddenly get clean and sober, then you probably cannot safely associate with them any longer. If you can then I doubt watching them get drunk or high will be much fun for you, nor will it support your recovery efforts in any way.

It is not that these people are bad people, or that they are not your friends, or anything like that. It is just that you have to make a decision and stick to it. If you keep hanging around with people who use drugs and alcohol, then you will eventually relapse because of it. **To think that you are strong and immune to this is just silly.** Test it out if you do not believe it, and realize how powerful the peer influence really is.

You have to eliminate old drinking buddies and people you got high with. Period.

12 step meetings and sponsorship

What action I took – Because I lived in a long term rehab, I was required to attend 90 meetings in 90 days when I first got sober, and then I was required to do 3 AA meetings per week while I lived there (which was for 20 months). I also got a sponsor, attempted to work a fourth and fifth step with him, and then got another sponsor and did the 12 steps with him as well (in written format using the NA Step Working Guide).

After 2 years of this I basically moved on from both meetings and sponsorship, and now sort of "do my own thing" in recovery without relying on the fellowship, meetings, or sponsors. This has continued now for the last 8 years plus.

What I suggest you do – I suggest that you start with meetings, and sponsorship, like I did. Obviously I cannot recommend long term use of either of these things, because that **is not** what has kept me clean over the last decade. But it certainly helped in the beginning, and I do not know of a better alternative for a solid support system in early recovery. The 12 step program is flexible, powerful, and widespread. Use it, even if you do not completely agree with the program.

Work

What action I took – I initially stopped working when I got clean and sober and was able to focus on myself for a few months. This was wonderful, and I would urge anyone to do the same if they have the opportunity to do so. Many people think that they could not possibly stop working, but then again, many addicts and alcoholics suddenly die from their disease, and they don't plan on that happening either! So taking leave of work **is** possible, whether you believe it is or not.

My therapist in long term rehab urged me to go back to work, and I reluctantly agreed. I am so glad I did. Getting back to work (in any job, I don't care what it is) does help with idle time, boosts self esteem, and so on. It helped me in a big way, especially in early recovery.

What I suggest you do – I suggest that you work, if you can. There are many subtle benefits to your recovery from doing so. Sure, some people cannot work, and some people simply will not work, but most people should try to be productive in some way. I suppose volunteering probably has a similar effect on recovery, though I have no direct experience with that (as an alternative to work anyway).

School

What action I took – I already had some college under my belt from several years ago, and I hesitated to go back to school. Everyone around me (therapist, counselor, family, friends) urged me to go back to school, so I finally relented. Again, I am glad I did (notice how taking suggestions from others really works out well in recovery?). I eventually graduated with a 4 year business degree and since then my salary has tripled.

I would also argue that going to school has lots of benefits for recovery *that go beyond career advancement* and such. Just the idea of continuous learning, and actually practicing that on a regular basis, is a huge step forward for many people in recovery. Education and recovery go hand in hand, in my opinion.

What I suggest you do – I suggest that you seek more education in early recovery. Like I said, it goes together well with early recovery from addiction. You might seek more training, go back to college, pursue a new degree, and so on. Pushing yourself to learn more only strengthens your recovery.

Some people might argue that this will overwhelm them, and that it might threaten their sobriety. I would argue this point with: "Has the person actually tried it? Have they actually sought out higher education and felt the impact that it had on their recovery?" **Probably not, in most cases.** As addicts and alcoholics, we can make excuses for just about anything. Pursuing higher education might cause people to push themselves a bit. And that is sort of the point....

Spirituality

What action I took – I did a few things in my early recovery when it came to spirituality. First, I started praying every day, without any religious influence on it whatsoever, just simple prayer as a child might do. I forced myself to do this every day. Second, I started exploring and reading books on spirituality. Third, I had a phase where I got into meditation quite heavily, and was meditating for up to 40 minutes at a time, very intense stuff. And fourth, because I was raised as a Christian, I read the entire New Testament in my early recovery.

Looking back, I can see that some of **my real breakthroughs with spirituality had nothing to do with any of those actions!** I am glad that I did them all, and I am glad that I explored those avenues. But ultimately I find spiritual meaning in others ways, such as:

- * **Exercise** (this is a very powerful meditation for me).
- * **Helping others in recovery** (again, very powerful from a spiritual standpoint).
- * **Forming a personal relationship with my higher power**, one that is not necessarily defined in a book somewhere.

What I suggest you do – I suggest that you find your own path when it comes to spirituality. For me, I was seeking, seeking, seeking for several years, and my "spiritual enlightenment" did not come to me in the way I was expecting at all. (Perhaps it never does?)

I suggest that you let go of your definition of "spiritual." It is probably bigger than what you imagine. For example, one of the largest parts of my spirituality comes in the form of running. It is a moving meditation that is far more powerful than any sitting meditation I ever did. Who would have thought?

The important thing is that you stay open to new ideas and keep seeking. It is the *seeking* that is spiritual, not the ideas in your head about what "spirituality" really is....

Recovery literature

What action I took – In early recovery, I dove into recovery literature head first and devoured almost everything that I could get my hands on. This is not necessarily a great approach though, in my opinion.

For one thing, I love to read, and to write. For me to read recovery literature is not such a helpful thing. Better for me to actually be out there facing my real issues, taking real action in my every day life, and so on. Plus, I was using reading as a bit of an escape in early recovery, and eventually had to "come out of my shell" and start living recovery in the real world.

Now that is not to say that you should avoid recovery literature. I think the NA Basic Text is particularly helpful for most people in early recovery, and it is a very easy read. The big book of AA is a bit more dated and has quite a bit of dry material in it, in my opinion.

What I suggest you do – Daily meditation books, step working guides, and other recovery literature were helpful to me as well. In particular, I did much writing and self-exploration through the NA Step Study Guide, and would recommend that to anyone who is interested in using writing as a tool of self discovery. Reading was a big part of this.

If you want to benefit from recovery literature then you have to do 2 things: you have to read and you have to write. Doing one without the other is only half the solution.

Find recovery literature that makes sense to you and read it. Study it.

Writing and self exploration

What action I took – As stated, I wrote extensively in the NA step working guide, and I also journal in electronic format. I type fast and I can spill my thoughts on to the computer screen very quickly. Doing this is a huge relief (mentally) and has many other benefits that have to be experienced to be appreciated.

What I suggest you do – I suggest that you journal, every single day. Simply write down (or type) your thoughts, and where you are at in your recovery, and in your every day life. What this does is it helps to free up mental space for other mental tasks.

Again, this has to be experienced to be understood. Write in a journal every single day, and you will realize that it is benefiting you greatly. *How* it benefits you is rather subtle and cannot be accurately put into words. Just try it.

The other writing I suggest that you do in early recovery is to write in the 12 steps, if that is your thing. Because it is introspective and causes you to dig into your own personal issues, writing in the steps can be hugely therapeutic. I recommend the [Narcotics Anonymous Step Working Guide](#).

But you can find other free materials out there as well to help guide you through written step work. In my opinion, the self exploration from doing so is worth it, even if you do not really subscribe to the 12 step model. Not a necessary step, but probably one worth exploring for most addicts.

Long Term Recovery

Exercise

What action I took – A therapist encouraged me to start working out when I was a few months into my recovery. I reluctantly tried but ultimately gave up, as it just was not really doing anything for me. I could not “get into it.”

Years later, as I continued to stay clean and sober, I started running on a regular basis. I am not sure what drew me to the exercise but this time I was ready for it, and it clicked eventually.

At first, exercise was hard, and not much fun. But I kept doing it, and at some point, it became a joy to run. Now it is something that I would not dream of doing without. It is vital to my recovery.

The reason exercise is vital to recovery is difficult to put into words. First of all, there is a huge physical rush that I get from exercise that has a profound effect on the way that I feel. Second of all, the benefits of regular exercise make me feel better and have more energy all-around. Third, the exercise itself is a meditation of sorts, and serves as an emotional stabilizer when I am having a rough day. The exercise is intense and it smooths out a day; it *resets it* in a way.

In my opinion, the exercise has to be **vigorous** and it has to be done regularly. Not every day, but certainly a few times per week. When you get done, you should be fairly well drained. Anything less and you are missing out on huge benefits, in my opinion.

What I suggest you do – I strongly suggest anyone in recovery experiment with exercise. It does not have to be running. It just has to be vigorous, something that gets the heart rate up. And it has to be done on a consistent basis, for a long period of time. The idea is to get to the point where it becomes effortless, and an important part of your life.

Fixing bad habits

What action I took – I continuously challenged myself to seek out bad habits and eliminate them. In particular, the main one for me in early recovery was smoking cigarettes. I knew that this was something that I had to eliminate in order to be really happy with myself. I tried and failed many times to quit smoking before I finally “got it.”

Another bad habit I had in very early recovery was to allow myself to engage in self pity. I loved to do this and it was an automatic response for me at the time. It was my justification for using drugs and alcohol. I quickly realized that I would have to put a stop to this habit of self pity if I was going to stay clean and sober.

So I had to overcome these bad habits, and I had to ask for help to learn how to do so in both cases. But most importantly, I had to develop the **willingness** to tackle these problems in the first place. It is so easy to just turn a blind eye to our shortcomings and stay stuck in an unhealthy pattern of living.

Therefore, the real challenge is to keep asking yourself: “*What can I change about my life now that will have the greatest positive impact?*” For me, at the time, that was quitting smoking. At another point in my recovery, the answer was “Stop engaging in self pity.”

This process never really ends, and I still seek out positive changes that I can make today. For example, there are negative aspects of my diet that I am still trying to change, in order to become more healthy.

What I suggest you do – Ask yourself: “What is the biggest change I could make in my life to help my recovery today?” Then do it. Prioritize accordingly. If you are clean and sober, then make sure you are taking a look at your overall health. Recovery is about healthy living. If you die of lung cancer, what good is your sobriety? If you are obese and have a heart attack, what good is your recovery? **Dying sober is not as noble as living sober and helping others in recovery.** You have to consider **your overall health**, especially in long term sobriety.

Push yourself to eliminate bad habits in your recovery.

Helping others in recovery

What action I took – When I was finishing up my first year of sobriety, my sponsor enlisted my help in chairing some NA meetings inside of a rehab center. So once a week I had to run a meeting for people who were in treatment. This was my first real twelfth step work, and I committed to it for over a year.

Later on I got a job at that same treatment center, and have continued to work there for the last 5 years and counting.

I also author and manage spiritualriver.com, which reaches out to a large number of people every day.

In my own way, I do what I can to help others in recovery. I do not go to 12 step meetings, nor do I sponsor people. That might work for you, but I have a different set of talents.

Helping other people in recovery is the strongest form of relapse prevention. Period. There is nothing you could do that would protect you more from relapse. Helping others has to be a priority in your life. It has to be something that you practice regularly. It is that important.

I think the important thing is that you reach out and help others in some way. The exact method in which you do so is not important. The connections you make are important. The impact you have is important.

If you can figure out what your unique gifts and talents are, and use those to help others in recovery, that is the best solution. What are you good at? Maybe you like speaking. If so, go to AA meetings. Maybe you like working with people one on one. If so, maybe you can sponsor others in recovery. And maybe your talents can be utilized in some other way to help people. Find what works for you.

What I suggest you do – Find a way to help others in recovery. What works for others may not work for you. You may have to “find your own path” when it comes to this. I knew one guy in recovery who used to drive people from the airport to a rehab. That was his job. And he was darn good at it. He was not a therapist, but he gave therapy. He had found his niche in recovery, his own way to help and to give back.

Become that guy. Find a way to help others in recovery and do it.

Pushing yourself to pursue holistic health and continuous growth

What action I took – I realized at some point in my first few years of recovery that I was just sort of coasting. I was not really pushing myself to grow in any way. I had reached a plateau, and nothing much was happening in my life.

It was then that I realized what they meant by **complacency**. If you get stagnant in your recovery, if you get complacent and stop growing, then you run the risk of relapse.

In order to overcome this, I started pushing myself to grow. I started to challenge myself to do more, to learn new things, to accept new challenges, and to stretch myself in new ways. I do not always do this perfectly but the important thing is that I realized that **this is the whole secret to continuous, long term sobriety**.

Holistic health is the idea that you have many different aspects of your overall health and well being. For example, you have your physical health, including fitness and nutrition and lack of disease. Then you also have your emotional health and stability. Of course you also have your spirituality and your tendency to help others in their recovery. Then there is mental health, and so on.

So the idea is that in long term recovery, you should be considering all of these aspects, and become willing to work on them all.

You might say one day “Gee, I have not really been in shape lately, and I have not really exercised much. I need to get back into that.” So then you **do it**. You commit to yourself and you start exercising again. And you stick with it and your recovery gets better and better because of it.

Remember that recovery from addiction is really about healthy living. Abstinence from drugs and alcohol is the foundation of this, **but you need to go further**. Seek health in other areas. When you make breakthroughs like this, and start exercising, or learn how to achieve emotional balance, this is very empowering for your overall recovery.

Addiction recovery is holistic. You have to treat the whole mind, body, and spirit in order to recovery. Therefore, your task in long term recovery is to keep pushing yourself toward better holistic health. This is a lifelong learning process. There is always room for growth and improvement.

What I suggest you do – Prioritize. What would make the biggest impact in your life right now? Quitting smoking? Starting to exercise every day? Eliminating a toxic relationship from your life? Moving into long term rehab? Figure out your highest impact action and then do it. Put all your energy into making that next major leap in your life. Do not try to tackle everything all at once. Just figure out what is most important to do next, and do it. One change at a time, you can rebuild a healthy life.

Summary of actions

Early recovery (first year or two):

1. Break through your denial – by getting honest with yourself about how well the drugs and alcohol are actually working for you.
2. Seek treatment – if you fail at treatment, then seek more intense treatment next time. Outpatient, inpatient, long term rehab, etc. Step it up and get serious.
3. Eliminate people who use drugs and alcohol from your life. Find new supportive friends to replace them. Allow time for this to happen.
4. Use 12 step meetings and sponsorship as tools in early recovery. If they work well for you, continue to use them. If not, move on.
5. If you can, get a job in early recovery. My opinion is that it does not much matter what it is (at this point).
6. Pursue more education, in some form.
7. Seek enlightenment in some form. Focus on the seeking, and stay open minded. This might include religion, or not. The important part is that you seek earnestly. The direction in which you seek matters little.
8. Read various recovery literature until you find something that clicks with you. Then, study it.
9. Write in a daily journal to free up mental energy. Write in the steps for additional therapy if you so desire.

Long term recovery (Start doing once staying clean and sober becomes automatic for you):

1. Exercise regularly. No excuses. Find something that works for you and do it.
2. Quit smoking. Eliminate bad habits. Keep pushing yourself to make positive, healthy choices.
3. Find your own unique way to help others in recovery. Do it on a regular basis.
4. Seek holistic health, one positive change at a time. Prioritize for the highest impact changes first.

Feel free to share this guide with others, [download it](#), print it out, whatever you would like. Thanks for reading!

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.