

Six Ways to Know if Your Recovery is Working

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How are you doing in recovery? Do you wonder if what you're doing is a success or not? Do you want to have a quick way to take the pulse of your recovery progress? Such questions are normal. In fact, if you didn't wonder how well you were doing, you might either be overconfident or in denial – or just not working recovery to the extent you should. In any case, it's good to take a reading on just what is working. So here are six ways that should help you know if your recovery is working.

1. You Awake Each Day with a Sense of Purpose

Going through rehab and getting to the point where you begin recovery takes a lot out of you. Now that the treatment stage and getting clean and sober is behind you, looking at your new life in sobriety is a whole new experience. For many it is the breath of fresh air that they haven't known in many months or years. For others early recovery is a chance for a do-over, a fresh start, a chance to create a life that's worthwhile and open to discovery.

It may seem like waking up each day with a sense of purpose is a natural thing – and it is. But it doesn't occur overnight. True, you may have some days when you've had a string of good things happen in your recovery and you feel really great about your progress, but there will also be other days when you feel as if you're climbing through mud uphill. It does get better.

Think of each day as a bright and shiny gift. If you look at the day unfolding and feel a sense of purpose – you know what you need to do and feel confident about your ability to do it – you will know that your recovery is working. Again, it doesn't have to be every day that you feel such sense of purpose for your recovery to be working. If the majority of the mornings when you awaken you feel this way, though, you are definitely on the right track. Keep doing what you're doing and your recovery will continue to strengthen.

2. You Embrace Change as a Positive Aspect of Growth

Coming from where you once were in your addiction – substance abuse of drugs or alcohol or both, process addictions such as compulsive gambling, compulsive spending,

compulsive sexual behavior, workaholism – it may be extremely difficult to begin to embrace change. After all, you reason, you've had to go through a tremendous amount of change already and maybe you don't feel up to tackling much more at the present time.

That's perfectly normal, so don't beat yourself up about the fact that you may be a little leery about change – right now. Just do yourself a big favor and hold out the possibility that you may wish to look at change in a different light. How can this help, you ask? Good question. Here's the answer.

Consider the seasons in nature. Without change, there would be no growth. Everything would stagnate. Without the rains of spring, no new growth would appear. Full bloom occurs in summer, and fall begins the time for shedding. Winter allows for deep roots to grow and for rest and preparation for spring. Human beings are like the seasons in that there are specific times for change and different processes we go through to become nurtured and grow. When we are addicted, we are a little like the death stage of nature, but we counter that by going through rehab and getting our bad habits pruned. Then, like spring, we're ready to bloom. See? We're talking about natural change.

Any period of gloom that may descend during early recovery isn't cause for alarm. You may just need a little more time to get acclimated to your newfound sobriety. Continue going to your 12-step meetings, get a sponsor and start working the steps and network like crazy with fellow 12-step group members. Re-connect and/or strengthen the ties with your family – your other crucial support network. Gradually, a little bit each day, you will start looking at your life in recovery in a more positive light. You will begin to see that change is something not to be feared, but to be welcomed.

If you are at this point now where you embrace change as a positive aspect of growth, you know that your recovery is on solid footing. Good work. Keep it up.

3. You are Able to See How you Build Upon your Successes

Having perspective means that we're able to see beyond the present and to view changes in our lives with the ability to assess how well we've done and where we can make improvements. Not everyone is equipped immediately upon completion of rehab to be able to think things through and see how all actions fit in perspective. This is something that takes time to develop.

And you do need to develop this ability. What it boils down to is a little bit of trial and error. You go to 12-step meetings and have intense discussions with your 12-step sponsor. You talk about and listen to others tell their experiences about what is the best

strategy to employ to overcome triggers and cravings and urges, how to deal with insomnia and anxiety or depression, how to begin to build self-confidence and a whole range of topics that are so important to those new to recovery.

What happens is that you start out trying whatever looks and sounds good. Never mind that you have no experience in doing any of this. You know that you need to “work the steps” and you’re eager – and a bit frightened and confused – to get going. Guess what? Sooner or later you stumble upon a winning combination. You’ve tried something your sponsor talked about that worked for him, added something you heard in the rooms, and then put a finishing touch on it by tailoring the strategy to your own circumstances. Voila! This is a success, and one that you should feel justifiably proud of.

The key to one success is to be able to build upon it. Just as you analyzed what was available in your toolkit (coping strategies, how to decrease stress, better ways to communicate with others, and so on), you need to be able to look at the string of successes you’ve achieved in your recovery and see how you can build upon them to take yourself to the next level.

In other words, you are advancing in your recovery journey, able to tackle steps that may have seemed too formidable to you before. Each step that you work through is yet another success in the foundation that is your recovery.

When you see how you can build upon your successes, you are surely on the right path in recovery. Your recovery is working, and that’s a tremendous achievement.

4. You are Flexible and Adaptive to Bend and Compromise When Necessary

Remember the Aesop fable about the oak and the reed? If not, here it is:

“An oak and a reed were arguing about their strength. When a strong wind came up, the reed avoided being uprooted by bending and leaning with the gusts of wind. But the oak stood firm and was torn up by the roots.”

Right away, you can get what the value of remaining flexible and adaptive means in recovery. Sure, there are going to be many obstacles and hurdles that will come your way, just as they do for every person in recovery. It doesn’t matter if you are only a few weeks new to recovery or if you’ve been in effective recovery for many years, tough times and crises major and minor will still occur. It isn’t the fact of the occurrence of these challenges – since they are bound to occur – but how the individual makes use of

all that he or she has learned, is flexible and adaptive enough to bend and compromise when necessary.

Sound too difficult? On the other hand, does it sound too easy? The interesting thing about recovery is that no two situations are alike. Even the same person will react differently each time a similar situation arises. This is the benefit of cumulative experience, of learning how to build upon your successes, and embracing change as a positive aspect of growth.

You can't allow yourself to become bowled over by a crisis. If you feel ill-equipped to deal with it, don't sit home alone and stew about it. Ask for help from your 12-step sponsor and fellow group members. Talk with your loved ones about what you need. Give yourself time to think about the best way to handle whatever's going on and then take the appropriate action.

Filter everything that you do through the lens of how it fits with your recovery plan. Recognize that you cannot remain rigid and still be standing after a hurricane (or major crisis) strikes. You need to be flexible – like the reed in the Aesop fable – and adapt to changing circumstances. With the knowledge that you gain day by day and the wealth of successes you've achieved, you will soon realize that your recovery is working. You are flexible and adaptable – both hallmarks of someone who's recovery is on-track.

5. You Feel Increased Self-Confidence and Self-Esteem

Everyone who enters early recovery remembers what it was like to feel beaten and hopeless. Some experienced such trials and tribulations during the depths of their addiction that they considered or tried suicide. Some were incarcerated. Others lost family, jobs, went into bankruptcy and personal ruin. Self-hatred, loss of self-confidence and self-esteem were etched deep into each person's persona.

When you first entered recovery, you may have felt a plethora of emotions. On the one hand, you heard and tried to believe that you had made a great achievement simply by getting clean and sober and completing rehab. It certainly wasn't easy, but now that you're in recovery that's not so easy either. You wonder where you're going to be able to find that rainbow you so desperately seek. Where is the horizon of self-confidence and self-esteem that your counselor told you marks effective recovery?

Those of you who have been in recovery for some time know – and are probably smiling right now – that self-confidence and self-esteem builds over time. With each day, week, and month of sobriety that you actively work the steps and concentrate on your recovery you get stronger and better able to deal with whatever comes your way. This is you

building up your self-confidence. And, as you make strides by increasing your store of self-confidence, guess what? Your self-esteem begins to be restored as well.

In fact, for some individuals who have been in long-term addiction, this awakening marks a kind of total rebirth. Lacking any sort of self-confidence or self-esteem, once such feelings start to blossom, it can be akin to a miracle – not only to the person in recovery but also to those who love and care about him.

When you feel an increased sense of self-confidence about your abilities and capabilities, and your sense of self-esteem is restored or instilled, you know that your recovery is working. Don't worry if it took a long time. The fact that you have it now is a testament to all your hard work and dedication. You deserve to feel great about yourself and your abilities in recovery.

6. You are Motivated to Help Others New to Recovery Get Their Foothold

Recovery experts say that working recovery is a lifelong journey. You will always be in recovery. It isn't a race. Recovery is forever. Therefore, you should never feel as if you have to hurry up and get there. There is here and now. You can only live in the present. Here and now is where you act.

Oftentimes people forget that they can't change what happened in the past. It is also important to stress that you are not defined by your addiction. You have made the choice to be clean and sober and live in sobriety. That's who you are. You act today to work your recovery. You also cannot worry about the future. That's pointless. The future will evolve out of what you do or do not do today.

Knowing that recovery is a lifelong journey, that you need to actively work your recovery each and every day, that you build upon your successes and increase your store of self-confidence and self-esteem, what's the clue that you're continuing to have effective recovery? If you're doing everything as you should and things are going well, isn't that enough?

Well, it can be if that's what works for you. There is no timetable etched in stone that says you need to be at this particular point at such and such a date. You decide how you feel. If you are inclined to want to help someone that's new to recovery better understand how this whole recovery thing works, you may wish to consider becoming a sponsor. Remember how important your own sponsor was during your first days and weeks of recovery? You can be that pillar of support and understanding to someone else just walking in the room for the first time.

Not ready to commit to being a sponsor yet? Don't worry. There's nothing that says you have to be a sponsor. You can help newcomers in other ways. Lend an understanding ear if someone approaches you. Talk about what worked well for you during group. Offer to help with group activities, to pick someone up and bring them to and from meetings if transportation is a problem. See how and when you can contribute of your time and expertise to benefit the entire group.

You could also work in the greater 12-step organization, helping out at the district level or working national conventions. If you feel motivated to help others new to recovery get their foothold, start by talking with your sponsor and indicate that you're ready. When you get to this point, you should feel confident that your recovery is working. Now, maybe you can help someone else begin their journey.

Recap

Let's recap the six ways you know your recovery is working:

- You awake each day with a sense of purpose.
- You embrace change as a positive aspect of growth.
- You are able to see how you build upon your successes.
- You are flexible and adaptive to bend and compromise when necessary.
- You are motivated to help others new to recovery get their foothold.

If you already see yourself in each of these, you're to be congratulated. If you're there with some but not others, you're probably well on your way. In any event, you're doing all the right things, so just keep doing them. Recovery is a gift – one that you have truly embraced.