

LAWYERS Assistance

By J.E. (Buddy) Stockwell

“IN RECOVERY” FROM ALCOHOLISM

What does it mean to be “in recovery” from alcoholism? Is being “sober” different from being “in recovery” and does any such difference impact long-term success rates? The experts say yes.

Sarah A. Benton, MS, LMHC, LPC, author of *The High Functioning Alcoholic* (Preager Publishers, 2009), explains that when an alcoholic simply stops drinking without incorporating components such as treatment and mutual-help programs, the person may be simply “white knuckling” his/her abstinence (aka, a “dry drunk”).¹

If the underlying issues that led to alcoholic drinking are left unaddressed, the person will continue to suffer. According to Benton, that is why many “sober” alcoholics may not be currently drinking, but they have developed unhealthy “transfer addictions” (such as food, sex or shopping) to fill the void left when alcohol use was discontinued. They may be sober, but their lives may be “exactly the same, leading them to be jealous of others who are drinking or to struggle with emotional or mental health issues,” she says.

An alcoholic “in recovery” is also sober but he/she has taken additional steps, such as treatment, support group participation and therapy, to address head-on the underlying emotional or mental health issues that fueled the alcohol dependency in the first place.

According to Benton, some individuals can swear off the use of alcohol permanently without any cravings or obsessions and those people are likely problem or heavy drinkers who may not have been alcoholics in the first place. But, for those suffering from alcohol dependency, “alcoholics may abstain for periods of time without help but in most cases will inevitably return to their previous drinking patterns,” Benton says.

While being “in recovery” from alcoholism is clearly understood and guarded by those who are in it, the general public does not have a clear view of what recovery is, partly because a standard definition has been elusive.

Judges and Lawyers Assistance Program, Inc. (JLAP)

Your call is absolutely confidential as a matter of law.

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In 2007, the Betty Ford Institute recognized the need for a more formal definition of “recovery” and commissioned a consensus panel to produce a report, “What is recovery? A working definition from the Betty Ford Institute.”² The introduction of the report frames the issue: “Individuals who are ‘in recovery’ know what it means to them and how important it is in their life. They do not need a formal definition. However, *recovery* is not clear to the public, to those who research and evaluate addiction treatments, and to those who make policies about addiction.”

A panel of 12 experts produced a three-part definition for “recovery” as follows: *A voluntarily maintained lifestyle characterized by sobriety, personal health, and citizenship.* To be “in recovery,” the person must *voluntarily* meet each of these criteria:

1) Sobriety, meaning abstinence from alcohol and all other non-prescribed drugs. Abstinence is considered primary and the cardinal feature of a recovery lifestyle. Early sobriety is one to 11 months; sustained sobriety, one to five years; and stable sobriety, five years or more.

2) Personal health, meaning an improved quality of personal life as defined and measured by validated instruments such as physical health, psychological health, independence and spirituality scales of the World Health Organization QOL instrument.³

3) Citizenship, meaning living with regard and respect for those around you as defined and measured by validated instruments such as the social function and environment

scales of the WHO-QOL instrument.

The consensus panel noted that criteria 2 and 3 are the components that extend sobriety (mere abstinence) into the broader concept of “recovery” and that “personal health and citizenship are often achieved and sustained through peer support groups such as AA and practices consistent with the 12 steps and 12 traditions.” It is also important to underscore that recovery requires a *voluntary* and willing commitment to recovery. Thus, admitting the problem and surrendering to help is required.

The Judges and Lawyers Assistance Program, Inc. (JLAP) effectively assists alcoholic lawyers, judges, family members, law students and bar applicants in their quest to establish stable recovery that will support successful, happy and productive lives despite prior problems with alcoholism.

If you or someone you know is trying to “white knuckle” his/her way through an alcohol problem, make a confidential call for help to JLAP at (985)778-0571 or email LAP@louisianalap.com and learn more about recovery. Your call is confidential and you do not have to give your name.

FOOTNOTES

1. See, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-high-functioning-alcoholic/201005/being-sober-versus-being-in-recovery>.

2. Published by Elsevier, Inc. and Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment, 2007.

3. According to the World Health Organization, the WHO-QOL is a quality-of-life assessment, developed by the WHO-QOL Group with 15 international field centers, simultaneously, to achieve an assessment applicable cross-culturally. www.who.int/mental_health/publications/whoqol/en/.

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