What is Recovery?

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Description:
The term ‘recovery’ is widely used in the research literature. Recovery is a goal of alcohol treatment, and recovery-oriented systems of care are being developed to support that goal. Alcoholics who no longer drink, and are trying to pursue an improved way of living/being, say that they are ‘in recovery.’ Yet for all its use, and seeming centrality, there is no agreed upon definition of the term within the alcohol literature. Lacking a definition, recovery usually is equated with abstinence or symptom remission in research, even though it is not so narrowly circumscribed by those who say they are in recovery. This alcohol methods development study aimed to develop a recovery definition that is based on how people who have been through the experience of recovery define the term. To develop potential items for the definition, the Alcohol Research Group conducted surveys and qualitative interviews (200+) with members of alumni groups from sober living and treatment programs, recovering staff, members of recovery organizations (many of whom will not have attended Alcoholics Anonymous/AA or treatment), and individuals in AA (many of whom will not have attended treatment). The resulting items were administered in a second online survey, which was completed by 9,341 individuals with different pathways to recovery.

Based on these results, we now have a very specific definition of recovery—and it is one that clearly demonstrates the many positive “ways of being” that define recovery. Here are a few examples of the elements of recovery:

Recovery is …
… being honest with myself
… being able to enjoy life without drinking or using drugs like I used to
… living a life that contributes to society, to your family or to your betterment
… being the kind of person that people can count on
… about giving back
… striving to be consistent with my beliefs & values in activities that take up the major part of my time & energy.

We made sure that different views were included in the final recovery definition. This left us with 39 items to represent the elements of recovery. For the full list, please go to our updated study website: www.whatisrecovery.org.

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