

A New Recovery Movement: A Rich History and a Potential Calling

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The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America

The history of addiction recovery mutual aid societies begins with Native American recovery “circles” (circa 1750) and spans the Washingtonians, the fraternal temperance societies, the reform clubs, the Drunkard’s Club, the Ollapod Club, the Godwin Association, the Keeley Leagues, the United Order of Ex-Boozers, the Harlem Club of Former Alcoholic Degenerates, and the Jacoby Club—all of whom predate the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935. That history continues with Narcotics Anonymous (and many other adaptations of A.A.’s 12 Step Program), religiously oriented support structures (e.g., Alcoholics Victorious, Alcoholics for Christ, Mountain Movers), gender-specific support groups (Women for Sobriety), secular frameworks of recovery (Secular Organization for Sobriety, Rational Recovery) and cultural/religious revitalization frameworks or adjuncts to recovery (e.g., addiction ministries, Firestarters).

The culture of recovery in America has deep historical roots, is growing daily, and is becoming ever more heterogeneous. The “recovery community” today is made up of diverse individuals and groups who, while differing in their views on how to best initiate and sustain sobriety, speak with a united voice about the hope for permanent recovery from addiction.

The history of addiction treatment begins with the care provided by a few progressive physicians in the late 18th century and spans 19th century inebriate homes, medically-oriented inebriate asylums, private addiction cure institutes, and bottled home cures for the “alcohol, drug and tobacco habits.” This flourishing network of treatment institutions—based on the concept that inebriety was a treatable disease—collapsed in the opening decades of the 20th century. The country, again discouraged about the prospects for recovery from addiction, embarked on a bold new strategy: let the existing alcoholics and addicts die off and prevent a new generation of alcoholics and addicts from being created by legally prohibiting the sale of alcohol and other drugs.

The opening decades of the 20th century were a bleak period for the addicted. They were shackled in “cells” within the “foul wards” of public hospitals, sequestered in inebriate penal colonies, and exiled to the back wards of aging and deteriorating state psychiatric hospitals. Even the wealthiest, who could afford to periodically dry out in private “jag-farms”(sanatoria), often died gruesome deaths after having their lives ravaged by addictive disease. Alcoholics and addicts were subjected to everything from mandatory sterilization laws to invasive treatments that would come to include lethal withdrawal regimes, “shock” therapy, and even psychosurgery (prefrontal lobotomies).

Sparked by A.A. and a new alcohol science, a “modern alcoholism movement” came together in the 1940s that sought to bring light to this dark period in the history of alcoholism. The focus of that movement was on changing America’s perception of alcoholism and the alcoholic, and it achieved considerable success during the middle decades of the 20th century. People like Marty Mann devoted their whole lives to changing public opinion about alcoholism and widening the doorway of entry into recovery. The “modern alcoholism movement” evolved into a “treatment movement” in the 1970s and 1980s that established, and then professionalized and commercialized, a national network of addiction treatment service organizations. That movement brought more addicted people into treatment in a few decades than had been treated professionally in the previous two centuries. Yet many believe that both the modern alcoholism movement and the treatment movement have passed their period of greatest vitality.

Today, at the cultural and social policy level, there is considerable evidence that alcoholism and other addictions are being demedicalized, restigmatized, and recriminalized. The care of alcoholics and addicts in the public health arena is once again being shifted to the punishment and control of alcoholics and addicts in the criminal justice system. The doors of hospitals and medical

clinics are again closing to alcoholics and addicts as the most disempowered addicts swell our jails and prisons. The true face of recovery is being lost as images of alcoholics and addicts are again being dehumanized, objectified, and demonized. On the professional front, many feel that the field of addiction treatment is in trouble—that treatment has become disengaged from its historical roots, detached from the larger and more enduring process of recovery, isolated from the communities out of which it was born, and divorced from significant breakthroughs in addiction science. The waning energy of the modern alcoholism movement and its progeny--the treatment movement--has left a void that is crying to be filled.

It is time for a new movement: a new recovery movement. The centerpiece of this movement must not be the proclamation that "alcoholism is a disease" or that "treatment works," but instead the proclamation that recovery is a reality in the lives of hundreds of thousands of individuals, families and communities. Leadership of this movement must come, not from the professional community, but from recovering people and their families. It is time for recovering people to break their collective silence, announce their presence in the culture, and begin educating and advocating on behalf of those who have yet to achieve recovery.

That new recovery movement is coming to life all across America. Recovering people constitute one of the largest and most invisible communities in America, and they are beginning to again assert themselves as a teaching and healing force. The new recovery movement is visible in the ever-growing varieties of support groups, its posters and t-shirts, its walkathons and Soberfests, its radio and cable programs, its internet web sites, its political lobbying, and the explosive growth in recovery support services that are removing barriers to recovery for thousands of individuals. This movement is putting a positive face on recovery at the same time it is trying to again anchor the placement of addiction within the medical and public health arenas.

Every month hundreds of thousands of recovering men, women and near-children quietly pass another 30 days, not just refraining from chemically destroying themselves, but by going to work everyday, loving their families, pursuing their own personal dreams, and giving

something back to their communities. Having been part of America's alcohol and drug problem, they are now part of its solution. They ask not for applause for this achievement but that the doorways of recovery remain open for themselves and for others who are still suffering. They are America's newest generation of wounded healers, and part of her invisible heroes.

Recovery is an immense blessing that comes with a difficult-to-repay debt of gratitude. If you were blessed by resources in your hour of greatest need, remember that others devoted their lives to create those resources. Pass it on by fighting to assure that those resources remain available for others. Some of you don't know it yet, but you were born to play a role in this new recovery movement. If you have a moment, give that moment; if you have a lifetime, offer that life. Open yourself to the needs of this movement. Open yourself to the calling to serve this movement in whatever way you can. Its goals are noble ones and laboring within this movement is a wonderful way to both celebrate and pass on the gift of recovery.

Some of you will feel you have to little to offer this new movement, but if there is anything the history of recovery in America tells us it is that the most perfect message can be delivered by the most imperfect of messengers. It is that recovering people can achieve together what none of them could achieve alone.

Friends of Recovery, New Hampshire is a vibrant part of the new recovery movement. If you want to be part of this new recovery movement and have have ideas, time and energy, call Joe Harding, 603 647 4629 or emial. at Joe@fornh.org . If you've been blessed with recovery and tried to help others, but feel that your community and your state and this whole country needs a 12-step, then by all means call the number above.

We will shape the future of recovery in America with a detached silence or with a passionate voice. It is time we stepped forward to shape this future with our stories, our time, our talents, and our philanthropy.

Call/ 603 647 4629/email joe@fornh.org today!

Ask them how you can help sustain this new recovery movement!