



HOW TO CREATE

A SENSE OF BELONGING IN RECOVERY



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Addiction feels like a one-person show. When you're addicted, it's all about you. It has to be, because your primary concern is answering the cravings—which feel like life or death—while trying not to let your addiction consume you. For this and other reasons, you may have alienated friends and family while you were addicted. Maybe you were hurtful to the people you love, or maybe you simply withdrew from them, or they from you.

Now that you're in recovery, you may feel like you don't fully belong in either world, addicted or sober. You may feel a bit isolated and lost. Rest assured these are normal feelings in early recovery, but your long-term success depends in part on healthy, supportive relationships and finding a sense of belonging and purpose in your life.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration stresses the importance of a sense of belonging in recovery.¹ Having purpose in life and feeling like you're part of a community can dramatically improve your chances of long-term success.

Purpose comes from conducting meaningful daily activities, like working, attending school, caring for the family or engaging in creative pursuits.

Community is comprised of your relationships and social networks that offer support, love, friendship and hope.

But these don't transpire from thin air. Repairing damaged relationships and developing new ones takes time and effort. Finding a sense of belonging in your community requires putting yourself out there, trying new things and being ready and willing to be a part of something bigger than yourself.

Here, we'll examine ways to find a sense of belonging in your community through honing your new identity, repairing old relationships, developing new ones and putting yourself "out there."





GROWING INTO YOUR NEW IDENTITY



Addiction affects thought and behavior. It leads you to take risks you wouldn't normally take and do things you wouldn't normally do. These things can erode your self-esteem and shape a negative self-identity.

Recovery brings with it a new identity. As you grow ever more distant from your using self, you begin to see yourself in new, more positive ways. A strong focus in treatment is helping individuals improve their self-esteem. In treatment, you learn to let go of damaging emotions like guilt and shame. You identify and evaluate the core beliefs you hold about yourself and discard those that are false or negative. You practice seeing yourself in a positive light.

How we perceive ourselves can have a major impact on our sense of belonging. Developing a new, positive self-identity in recovery is important for helping to foster a sense of self-worth and belonging in the various communities through which you circulate.

Here are some tips for improving your self-esteem and nurturing your new, positive self-identity.

- ♦ **Participate in a recovery fellowship.** A recovery support group is an important network of sober peers who can help you establish a new self-identity. A support group helps you work through issues that contribute to negative feelings about yourself.
- ♦ **Engage in positive self-talk.** Negative self-talk is a powerful thing, but happily, so is positive self-talk. When you find you're thinking negative thoughts about yourself, ask if what you're saying is actually true. Chances are, it's not. Make a conscious effort to turn your thoughts about yourself toward the positive.
- ♦ **Don't make comparisons.** Comparing yourself to others is sure to lead down a dark, lonely road where you'll always find yourself lacking. Nobody is perfect, even if they come across that way. When you catch yourself comparing yourself to someone else, stop. Make a mental list of the ways in which you're awesome, and move on.
- ♦ **Keep your mood up.** If you're in a good mood, you're more likely to exude positivity and feel good about yourself. The best three ways to keep your mood up are to exercise most days of the week, get a good night's sleep every night and do things you enjoy every day.
- ♦ **Help someone.** Helping other people can't help but give you warm feelings toward yourself. It's easy to be helpful and considerate, and doing so can increase your overall self-esteem. Go out of your way to be helpful to others, even in small ways.

- ◆ **Be okay with being human.** Everyone makes mistakes. If you snapped at your kid or your spouse, forgive yourself. If you wished an evil pox on your boss, don't hold on to any guilt or negative self-thoughts. Instead, acknowledge that you had a rough moment, make amends where you can and move on.
- ◆ **Change the things you can.** You can't change everything about yourself, your circumstances or your relationships right out of the gate. Focusing on things you can't change is a dead end and leads only to frustration and negative feelings. Focus instead on the things you can change, and take steps to make those changes.
- ◆ **Spend less time with people who make you feel bad about yourself.** If you have friends or family members who make you feel less than worthy, limit the time you spend with them. You may even want to consider cutting them out of your life altogether if they tend to affect you deeply and negatively.
- ◆ **Don't let your history of addiction define you.** You're not an "addict." You're a person who struggled with addiction. Your addiction is part of your story, but it does not define you.





REPAIRING

OLD RELATIONSHIPS



A sense of belonging comes largely from our relationships with others. But what if you've damaged your relationships with the people you feel you belong with most? Regaining a sense of belonging with people who are important to you can improve your quality of life and your chances of long-term recovery. But this won't always happen overnight.

Here are some important things you can do to help undo some of the damage and improve your relationships with important people in your life.

- ◆ **Make amends.** Chances are, you did your share of lying when you were addicted, and you may have manipulated, cheated, stolen from or otherwise used your friends and family members. There is nothing you can do to change what happened. But you can apologize to each person you harmed and make amends wherever possible.
- ◆ **Doing so puts you on new footing in your life and helps shape your new identity.** Since you've done everything you can possibly do to make up for the wrongs you committed, you can let go of any lingering guilt, shame and regret and move forward, a new person.
- ◆ **Be patient.** Don't get discouraged if repairing some of your relationships is slow-going. Depending on the circumstances, it can take some time to regain lost trust and show loved ones that you've changed. Once you've apologized for your wrongdoings and made amends wherever you can, the next step is to live your life in the best, healthiest way possible, day by day.
- ◆ **Say it with actions, not words.** In many cases, it will take more than apologies and promises to convince your loved ones that you have changed. Regard every day as an opportunity to show the people you love through your actions and behaviors that you no longer identify as a user, but rather as someone in recovery.



- ◆ **Be honest.** Honesty is one of the five rules of recovery, according to an article published in the *Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine*.² Strive to be completely honest with yourself and other people. Honesty in all things, large and small, is crucial for preventing relapse, and it's also paramount for repairing relationships.
- ◆ **Engage in therapy.** Family therapy can help you and other loved ones work through a range of issues to restore trust, improve communication and reduce dysfunctional behaviors like co-dependence and enabling. Family therapy is an important part of a high-quality treatment plan, and continuing with it in early recovery can make a huge difference in your relationships.
- ◆ **Develop healthy relationship skills.** Maintaining healthy relationships takes mindfulness and hard work. The most important relationship skills include communication, conflict resolution, stress management, seeing a situation from another's perspective and listening without defensiveness.
- ◆ **Ask your loved ones to get support.** If your addiction and the way you treated your loved ones really did a number on them, individual therapy or joining a support group can help them. Very close friends and family members may need to work through their own dysfunctional thought and behavior patterns that developed as a result of the addiction. Therapy or a support group like Al-Anon can also help loved ones understand how your addiction directly affected your brain function and behaviors.



It's important to note that just because you share a history or some DNA with someone, it doesn't mean that person is good for you. Not everyone deserves space in your life. Your relationships with others should be healthy, positive and supportive. They should add value to your life and make you feel good about yourself.



DEVELOPING NEW CONNECTIONS

Every new person you meet won't necessarily become a lifelong friend, of course. As nature and numerous invisible forces would have it, there will always be people we just don't connect with. And that's okay. Some people have just a small handful of friends with whom they truly feel they belong. It will take some time to meet new people, develop new friendships and become part of a larger social network.

Here are some tips for making meaningful connections with others:

- ♦ **Work on accepting others.** Let go of stereotypes you've held on to over the years. Discard preconceived notions of people based on income, religion, race, sexuality or whether they like the Beatles. Let the new people you meet be a blank slate until you can fill in the details as you get to know them. Withhold judgment at all times. Life isn't easy, and everyone has demons they struggle with.
- ♦ **Focus on the things you have in common rather than on your differences.** You may meet people who seem to be completely different from you. Maybe they're a sports fanatic and you like art. Maybe they're devoutly religious and you're agnostic. These fundamental differences don't always mean you're incompatible

Instead of writing off a friendship before it even gets started, look for the similarities you have with a new acquaintance. You may find common ground that can serve as the foundation for an enduring friendship despite your differences.





- ◆ **Ask questions.** If you find it hard to engage in small talk, or you never really know what to say when you meet someone new, you're not alone. The Anxiety and Depression Association of America points out that around 15 million Americans suffer from social anxiety, which can make it hard to get to know new people.³ One strategy that can help if you feel awkward meeting new people is to shift your focus from yourself to the other person. Ask open-ended questions, and let your new acquaintance do the talking. This will help you get to know someone new, and it opens up topics for conversation.
- ◆ **Be authentically you.** Trying to be who you think other people want you to be is a mistake that always ends badly. The truth is, people will like you more, and be drawn to you more, if they sense authenticity. Be yourself, your ideal self, when you meet new people. If you're funny and weird, be funny and weird. If you're smart and deep, be smart and deep. If you hate skiing, don't pretend you love it because the others in your conversation do.

A woman with blonde hair is looking out of a train window. Her hair is blowing in the wind. She is wearing a black and white striped shirt. The background shows a green landscape with trees and a cloudy sky. A dark blue semi-transparent box is overlaid on the bottom right of the image, containing the text "FINDING WHERE YOU BELONG".

FINDING

WHERE YOU BELONG

An interesting thing about humans is that we form rich, thriving communities around common interests. You'll find a passionate, tight-knit community surrounding just about any subject you can imagine, from cooking to comic books, fashion, fishing, gardening and guitar playing.

The important thing about communities, and the reason people form them and flock to them, is that a sense of belonging is one of a human's essential needs, like food and shelter. It's part of what gives our lives purpose and meaning.

The more you do, the more likely you'll be to come into contact with people with whom you can build connections. Getting out and about in the community as much as you can gives you plenty of opportunities to meet new people. Here are some ways to get out of the house and get involved.

- ♦ **Find what entertains you.** What activities are you drawn to? What piques your interest? What would you like to learn how to do, or learn more about? For every activity you can imagine, there are fans and followers getting together to share their passion. Look for a bowling league, bike club or book group to join. Take a writer's workshop, or start training for a race. Sign up for a cooking or welding class at the local community college. Learn how to read palms or play an instrument. Host a radio show on a local station. When you really start thinking about it, the possibilities are endless.



- ◆ **Give back.** What are your inherent strengths and values? What are your talents? How can you put these to work for a cause that's important to you? Volunteering your time and skills puts you in touch with others who share similar passions—and it benefits you in some key ways. A large body of research shows that volunteering improves self-esteem, increases feelings of happiness and makes you more optimistic and positive overall. The Mental Health Foundation points out that helping people creates a feeling of community and belonging and reduces feelings of isolation and loneliness.⁴

- ◆ **Try new things.** Be up for trying new things. Confront old, outdated beliefs about what you enjoy and don't enjoy. A willingness to try new activities—eat sushi, play a sport, go to the opera—keeps things interesting. It offers opportunities to make connections with others, and it helps you stay flexible and open-minded, two important characteristics in recovery.
- ◆ **Join a faith community.** If you feel drawn to join a community of faith, most churches, synagogues, temples and mosques welcome visitors. Spend some time "shopping around" for a place where you feel welcome and valued. If you're interested in exploring spirituality without subscribing to a particular religion, the secular Oasis Network holds non-religious weekly gatherings in many cities and creates community for the good of humanity.⁵ The non-religious Sunday Assembly is a weekly gathering that focuses on helping people be who they want to be and live the kind of life they desire while making positive contributions to the greater community.⁶
- ◆ **Find employment or change jobs.** A workplace community can be an important support in recovery, and the people you work with have the potential to become good friends. If you're looking for a job, strive to find one that's a good fit for your interests and skills. A culture of respect, tolerance and acceptance is ideal in any workplace. If you're unhappy with your current workplace situation or relationships, it may be time to look for new employment options.



PURPOSE AND BELONGING
CAN MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE



A sense of purpose and belonging improves your chances of successful recovery for the long-term. It increases your quality of life and promotes a keen sense of well-being. Finding purpose and a sense of belonging is a matter of being the person you want to be, enjoying healthy, productive relationships and putting yourself "out there." It won't happen overnight, but if you put in the time and effort, it will happen, and it will transform your life.

SOURCES

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