

WHEN SOCIETY LOSES CONTROL: A NEW CHALLENGE TO HEALTHY RECOVERY

By Stephanie Brown, Ph.D.

Ever since the beginnings of my own recovery, I've been asking the question "what happens to people after they stop drinking?" I've been exploring the terrain of recovery and outlining theories about just what happens for over 40 years. I've defined recovery as a process, not an event, which occurs developmentally over a lifetime following abstinence from alcohol or other substances and addictions. Over the years, it's become a broader question: what happens to people who have lost control and come to face it?

The idea of "recovery" is not new. Something happens after abstinence. But understanding just what happens is still a challenge. For decades lay and professionals alike believed that abstinence was the goal and the end point of treatment. Abstinence would be a static state of wonderful. Then we came to understand there's more.

The idea of "family recovery" is still new. We learned in The Family Recovery Research Project during the 1990s that recovery is, and can be, bigger than the individual addict. Help has been available for family members, but it's still hard to comprehend what is "normal" in a long-term process of change for the family as a whole.

We used to believe that active addiction was bad and recovery was good. Simple. Abstinence would be the "fix" that makes everyone well and everyone happy. It turns out recovery is not so simple. It is good, but it is also hard in ways that nobody expected. Recovery is a process of radical change and growth, with highs and lows and massive uncertainty, all leading to a much healthier self and relationships eventually. We learned that it was helpful for families in treatment and new recovery to have a "map" that would help them normalize the rough and rugged road ahead. Teaching families to expect radical disruption as normal, and to give them tools to cope with this turmoil, provided reassurance and support to navigate the anxieties of massive change that recovery would bring. We learned that the process of recovery is counterintuitive: what is normal goes against what is logical. Instead of "happy ever after" with no problems, the family in recovery embarks on a tumultuous process of change which can throw everyone into high anxiety, panic and often a greater sense of danger than during active addiction. "At least then, we knew what to expect even if it was awful," said a baffled family member. "Now, nobody knows what's happening." We came to call new abstinence the trauma of recovery for the family.

This was shocking news: the normal processes of individual and family recovery are destabilizing, creating chaos that makes no sense, unless you know it's normal. With all this disruption, people reach out for support in order to maintain their focus on their addiction and recovery so they can create and maintain a quiet-enough calm to help them keep their focus on the tasks of recovery growth.

Individuals and families rely on "holding people and environments" outside the family, such as continuing care in treatment programs, 12-step groups and people, and other community resources to provide essential support in weathering the long, often chaotic and stressful process of change for the family.

We used to think of society as a "holding environment," a "normal" place of stability, providing structure and healthy social mores when the family collapsed in the throes of addiction and the stresses of new recovery. People anticipated a "reintegration" into normal life. But now society is out of control, addicted to a faster and faster pace of life. Society no longer operates as a safe haven for wobbly individuals and families new to their recoveries. For many, society is now the major threat, a bigger version of their own "alcoholic family".

New Threats To The Stability Of Recovery

Before the 21st century, many challenges could threaten the stability of recovery – the ups and downs of normal life such as illness, work stresses, financial gains and losses, even a family member's active relapse. Families in recovery learned to cope with life's challenges without losing their recovery perspective and stability.

Now we've got a cultural bandwagon that *does* threaten to destabilize all recovering individuals and their families. I have called this societal threat SPEED, our addiction to going faster and faster in a grandiose, unlimited pursuit of progress and success. People embarking on new recovery are finding it difficult to maintain a focus on the realities of their addiction, including the new learning necessary to establish and maintain recovery. They reach outside the family for safe supports, but these people and structures are gone, lost in a cultural addiction to speed.

Society has lost control, exactly like the addict and family lose control in the downward spiral of active addiction. Society is caught in the same out-of-control behavior, distorted, illogical thinking, including denial and rationalization, and the intense, internal pressure to score – to stay on-line, to keep plugged in, to never stop – the same emotional state of the addict on a run with the terrified family helpless to stop it.

We are seeing families in recovery thrown backwards into loss of control and a dangerous new addiction, this time to technology and the pursuit of "more, better, Faster." The emotional experience of being addicted to technology can also trigger a relapse to the first, core addiction. The alcoholic in recovery chases a fast pace and begins to rely on sleep medications, for example. The natural body rhythms and the development of self-regulation that grow with time in recovery are quickly lost to the high of success. The dry drunk common to new abstinence becomes the normal state. People may remain in abstinence from alcohol, other drugs, food or gambling, but they are no longer calm, no longer able to focus, to listen to others and reflect. Chasing after SPEED, the family is on a dry drunk that threatens to derail all of family recovery.

SPEED is society's new addiction that calls us all to get on board. The lure of wild success promotes a gambling state – go baby go, blow on the dice – faster, faster, spend; spend as if there's no bottom.

The cultural mandate to never slow down, never accept limits, threatens every individual, couple and family in recovery. Individuals in recovery have accepted loss of control. Families in recovery have learned the same core truth: we all have limits. The path of recovery is grounded on this acceptance. Yet, society is now waving the lure that we can once again have it all. Just like the recovering addict can be drawn back to have "just one," new SPEED addicts vow to take time, to slow down, but often lose their way. The will to get on board society's new gold rush is overwhelming many people in recovery. It doesn't take long to lose the calm, the center, and your deep knowledge of limits. It doesn't take long to be off and running.

Treatment centers, 12-Step programs and recovering communities must become aware of the new addiction. It will take careful, constant attention to the principles of recovery to withstand the pull to give it up in the service of finding a new high.

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She is especially well known for her work on the theory and treatment of adult children of alcoholics.

Dr. Brown's many contributions to the field include research, teaching, clinical work, and publishing, including her books on ACOAs and The Family Recovery Research Project. In her latest book, SPEED: Facing Our Addiction to Fast and Faster and Overcoming Our Fear of Slowing Down -Berkley(Penguin)2014, she applies her theories of addiction and recovery to a culture that has lost control. www.stephaniebrownpd.com.