

## To Explore the Recovery Challenges Faced by Individuals with A History of Alcoholism: A Qualitative Study

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### ABSTRACT

The qualitative exploratory study examined the experiences and outcomes of individuals in India who are recovering from alcohol addiction. By utilizing a purposive sample of 10 individuals, the research employs open-ended questions to understand their recovery. The major themes of the study were (a) improvement in lifestyle (b) handling emotional challenges (c) craving management and long-term recovery, and (d) shift towards positive outlook. The study emphasized on the importance of a comprehensive recovery approach that includes not only physical health but also emotional issues, social integration, and personal growth.

**Keywords:** *Alcohol Addiction, Challenges, Recovery Journey, Management*

The pathway to recovery from alcoholism is sometimes presented as a straight line to wellbeing, but for many, the recovery phase presents its own set of complex challenges. This journey towards recovery typically spans over many years, averaging around 28 years and involves many treatment efforts, with 4 to 5 episodes every 8-year period (Dennis et al., 2007). This road is distinguished by its length and complexity, demonstrating that recovery is not always positive or straightforward process.

Alcohol Dependence Syndrome (ADS) is a medical diagnostic that describes a set of behavioral, cognitive, and physiological symptoms that can develop as a result of persistent alcohol use. Jellinek, a pioneer in alcoholism research, introduced *The Disease Concept of Alcoholism* in 1960, defining it as any alcohol use causing harm to the individual or society. George Vaillant in this book *The Natural History of Alcoholism* published in 1983, also viewed alcoholism as a disease but his stance diverged from the classical disease concept. Clarke and Saunders (1998), along with organizations like the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and the American Medical Association, recognize alcoholism as an uncontrolled disease, emphasizing that true control can't be regained even after prolonged abstinence.

The Recovery Science Research Collaborative define recovery as 'an individualized, intentional, dynamic, and relational process involving sustained efforts to improve wellness'

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(Ashford, et al. 2019). The journey of recovery from alcohol dependence is a deeply personal and multifaceted process that can vary greatly from one individual to another. According to The Betty Ford Institute Consensus Panel (2007), the concept of recovery is seen as a progressive and multifaceted process, divided into three distinct stages: the initial year being 'early recovery,' the period from the first to the fifth year as 'sustained recovery,' and beyond five years as 'stable recovery,' each phase marking a significant step towards enduring sobriety. In this paper, I will be focusing on the 'sustained recovery' phase of the recovery members. Maintaining sobriety is an ongoing process that may involve lifestyle changes, such as developing healthy routines, avoiding triggers, and building a supportive network. Relapse can be a part of this journey for many, serving as a learning point to strengthen recovery strategies. The risk of relapse is significantly higher during the initial phase of recovery, estimated between 50–70%, but dramatically decreases to around 15% once reaching the stage of stable recovery. Research by Dennis et al. (2014) suggests that after five years, recovery tends to become self-sustaining, reducing the need for external support systems.

### **Procedure**

To obtain insight into the recovery issues, this qualitative study begins by choosing 10 individuals in recovery from alcoholism using purposive sampling. A qualitative survey with structured open-ended questions was designed to investigate the various obstacles. To create a climate favourable to open and honest discussion, data was collected using face-to-face interviews, phone calls, or internet platforms, depending on the participants' preferences.

Participants were urged to provide detailed comments to reflect the richness of their experiences. All the interview were then transcribed for extensive examination. Thematic analysis was used to identify codes and themes relevant to the study's aims.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Improvement in Lifestyle***

We see a considerable lifestyle change in individuals in recovery, with a transition from a lack of physical activity to everyday exercise along with establishing improved eating habits. *“My recovery journey has significantly altered our daily routine. I've become more conscious of my health, adopting a healthier diet and regular exercise, which I didn't earlier.”* This integrated routine of physical fitness and nutritional care is highlighted by the participants as essential for maintaining long-term recovery.

### ***Emotional Challenges***

Many individuals expressed regret and remorse about their prior conduct when in addiction. They mentioned feeling disoriented and disorganized. *“In the past I was totally unorganized, short tempered, I used to rash drive, abuse and pick fights with others.”* This sense of shame and guilt might make it harder for them to navigate their recovery journey. However, it also motivates them to avoid repeating previous mistakes and strive for growth. *“I think about my past experiences and how bad they were. I don't want to go there again”.*

The fear of relapse appeared as a substantial and broad emotional worry across virtually all participants, emphasizing its importance in the recovery process. Laudet et al. (2006) observed that reverting to previous routines following sobriety might be difficult for both individuals in recovery and their support networks.

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The stigma surrounding alcohol use disorder (AUD) greatly impedes individuals' willingness and capacity to seek treatment, resulting in emotions of humiliation, guilt, and isolation. *"It feels like everyone knows what is happening in your life."* Addressing this stigma is critical to creating a supportive atmosphere favourable to rehabilitation.

### ***Craving Management and Long-Term Recovery***

The study found that participants adopted various strategies to control alcohol. Most people reported diverting themselves from cravings through creative activities, music, or TV. *"It is only a matter of seconds when you feel very strong urge, I distract myself at that time."* By relaxing their minds, their thoughts of drinking faded, leaving them feeling like a winner and pleased of their self-control.

The participants mentioned instances that motivated them to stay sober during tough times, such as considering the repercussions of relapsing and reliving previous alcohol-related experiences. *"I don't want the problems which were caused due to me to happen again."* They fear returning to that negative state therefore they utilize these reflections to keep themselves from succumbing to desires.

The participants stated that long-term recovery requires daily work, with an emphasis on adhering to a regular routine. They also underlined that adopting a healthy lifestyle, including regular exercise and a balanced diet, to promote their long-term rehabilitation.

In addition, spirituality and religion play a vital role in the recovery journey of individuals who have struggled with alcohol addiction. For many participants, spirituality provides a source of strength, hope, and guidance, aiding them in navigating the challenges of recovery. *"At times in recovery I see spiritual light in my dreams... I started to think more about such dreams and concluded that this power wants me to come out of my addiction"*

These spiritual experiences, indicates a deep personal connection and interpretive framework that participants use to make sense of their recovery process.

### ***Shift to Positive Outlook***

The study's findings reveal that participants experienced a marked transition from feelings of guilt, shame, and purposelessness to a state of increased responsibility, self-confidence, and self-acceptance. *"...I feel more responsible now, I feel like I have a new purpose. I am more aware of the things I do..."* This reflects the deep personal growth and behavioral transformations that are possible through the recovery process. Participants highlighted their journey from a past marred by alcohol misuse to a present where they are more in tune with their values and aspirations. The recovery journey, as described, is not just about abstaining from alcohol but also about rediscovering oneself and forging a new, positive path in life.

The study's limitations include a small and specific sample size, which may not represent the broader population of individuals recovering from alcohol addiction, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings. Conducted exclusively in India, the cultural and societal contexts might not reflect those of other regions.

Additionally, reliance on self-reported data could introduce biases like inaccurate recall. Moreover, the absence of a control group makes it challenging to definitively attribute the observed changes to the recovery strategies used.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study vividly illustrates the multifaceted journey of individuals recovering from alcohol addiction, key themes that emerged include improvements in lifestyle, handling emotional challenges, successful management of cravings, and a shift toward a more positive outlook.

These findings highlight the significant role that organized routines to sustain long-term recovery. Participants showed extraordinary resilience, adopting better behaviours and facing emotional issues head-on. The risk of relapse remains a major worry, highlighting the importance of ongoing support networks that address both psychological triggers and societal stigmas associated with alcohol use disorder.

Furthermore, spirituality and personal reflection appeared as critical in offering strength and perspective to participants as they navigated their recovery path. Recovery may lead to a positive perspective and a renewed sense of identity and purpose.

To establish a strong foundation, cultivating a robust support system, which includes participation in organized rehabilitation programs is recommended to recovery members. Therapy can help address underlying emotional or psychological disorders and promote long-term rehabilitation. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle is essential. Regular physical activity and a balanced diet, while periodic health check-ups keep to track on general health. New hobbies or community activities might help them feel more purposeful and fulfilled. Patience and having an optimistic attitude are essential during the rehabilitation process. Recovery may be a long-term process with possible setbacks, so acknowledging small victories can encourage ongoing effort and dedication.

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***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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