

Does recovery happen in NA?

... and how long does it take?

The answers have important practical implications

HOW LONG DOES it take a drug user to 'recover' once they stop using? I addressed this question with the help of members of Narcotics Anonymous (NA)¹ – an accessible supply of currently abstinent people with a history of heavy drug use. Uninterrupted abstinence ('cleantime') is highly valued by NA groups. Recovery was measured with standard anxiety and self-esteem questionnaires. The survey was conducted within NA traditions, meaning it was independent and not in any way affiliated to NA.

The first survey (summer 1990) involved interviewing 200 NA members, half of them men and half women. Eighty were in their first year of recovery, 40 in their second; years three to six had 20 ex-addicts in each. For comparison purposes, the tests were also given to a control group of 60 'normal' students (30 men and 30 women) with no history of heavy drug use and not in psychotherapy.

From other studies we know that current users and those who have just given up are more anxious than normal. We found that the ex-users had higher anxiety (and lower self-esteem) than 'normals' although most had not used drugs for over a year,² suggesting elevated anxiety lasts longer than was previously known.

As 'cleantime' accumulated, self-esteem, anxiety and employment levels gradually improved, supporting the theory that NA addresses the core problem of low self-esteem.³ But not until the fourth year of recovery did scores approach those of the control group (see figure 1).

Surprisingly, there was no overall improvement in scores from year one of abstinence to year two. To feel that bad about yourself and anxious is a very unpleasant place to be. Ex-users explained that the 'goalposts move'. Having no job and difficulty in relating to normal people are of little concern in early recovery; abstinence is enough. Later, recovery brings with it greater expectations from life – new things to feel anxious about. Rapid improvement (the "honeymoon period", estimated at several weeks or months) followed by a rise in anxiety is well known in NA (and AA). Women had lower self-esteem than men among the ex-users but not among the controls, in line with research showing female addicts are more disturbed than men.⁴

Need for continuing support

To ensure that the ex-users were really changing, 81 were tested again six months later. Changes in self-esteem and anxiety were plotted against how long they had been in recovery (see figure 2). Despite the winter gloom, generally they were getting better. Those in their fourth and fifth year of recovery were improving fastest. Little change was found in years six (by then people were already 'normal') and year one, supporting the earlier finding of a two-year delay before consistent psychological improvement.⁵ Professional counselling or psycho-

Figure 1. How anxiety and self-esteem improve

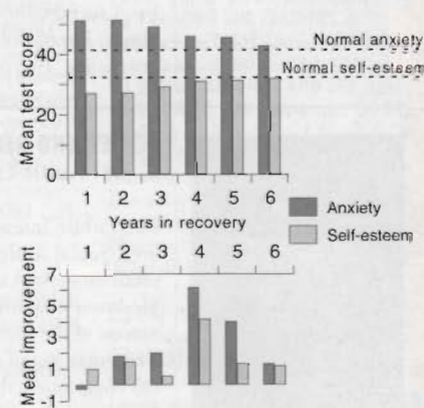


Figure 2. Improvement* over 6 months

*decrease in anxiety or increase in self-esteem

therapy (used by half the sample) appeared to have little effect on anxiety and self-esteem levels. However, it could be that those who sought such help were more distressed than their associates, and that it reduced their distress to the level of the rest of the sample. More women used professional support, possibly because there is less female support available within NA. In the NA groups contacted there were twice as many men as women, in line with a US survey.⁶

WHAT ARE THE implications? Ex-users do 'get better', but this seems to take many years. There is a need for continued vigilance. Two years abstinent, ex-users might feel they have 'cracked it'. This complacency will not prepare them for the difficulties that still lie ahead.⁷ There is a need for support well beyond the one or two-year aftercare periods offered by many abstinence-based treatments. The fact that those in their sixth year of recovery appeared to have near normal levels of anxiety and self-esteem raises an interesting question: do they still need to remain abstinent and attend NA meetings, or are they essentially 'cured'? In any case, this study should give hope to all drug users who have the courage to try a new way of life. ○

1. Peyrot M. "Narcotics Anonymous: its history, structure, and approach." *International Journal of the Addictions*: 1985, 20(10), p.1509-1522.

2. Christo G. and Sutton S. "Anxiety and self-esteem as a function of abstinence time among recovering addicts attending Narcotics Anonymous." *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*: 1994, 33, p.198-200.

3. Wells B. "NA and the 'Minnesota Method' in Britain: time to build bridges." *Druglink*: 1987, 2(1), p.8-9.

4. Gossop M. "Drug dependence and self-esteem." *International Journal of the Addictions*: 1976, 11(5), p.741-753.

5. This finding needs to be replicated before we can accept it as fact. Although the follow-ups were representative of the main sample, the low follow-up rate is an obvious flaw in the survey. It was unknown how many missing follow-ups were just unavailable, or had left NA, either because they no longer needed it or because they had relapsed.

6. NA World Service Office. "Member Survey." *N.A. Newsline*: 1990 6(6).

7. I am not suggesting that recovery is a specific effect of NA; half the sample were using professional help.

by

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