

Blog #4: Changing Relationship as a Young Person in Recovery

By Joely Feder

Here is the fourth installment of the blog. To protect the confidentiality of participants, names and some personal information have been altered.

When entering recovery, many people experience a shift in the relationship dynamics in their lives. This may be reflected in romantic relationships, friendships, family relationships, work, or school.

Through conducting the Peer Voices Project, I got to hear about these relationship shifts from other young people in recovery. Read on to learn more about how my peers navigated relationship changes during this big life change.

Changing Social Circles

Many people I interviewed discussed their social circles changing when they entered recovery. In fact, BK, BA, Miranda, and LA all described a complete shift in who they talked to and hung out with.

AB shared that by the time she began seeking out recovery, she wasn't "friends with anybody [she] was friends with [in active addiction]" because certain people didn't want to associate with her anymore. Similarly, KB shared that one of the hardest parts about entering recovery was losing her social circle.

For BK and BA, who both entered recovery at 18 years old, losing friendships caused a great deal of pain and isolation. In time, though, both were able to rebuild their social circles.

Being Met with a Lack of Trust, Skepticism, or Negativity

Many interviewees also expressed feeling like there was a lack of trust in many of their relationships. SP shared, "I think early on, I was met with a pity and a skepticism that didn't feel particularly good," and noted that "it felt like I wasn't trusted," and "it manifested in [him] as shame."

BA expressed a similar sentiment, and shared, "when I first came into recovery, there was that lack of trust. There was nothing there," particularly in describing her relationship with her parents.

Other peers experienced different, but still negative, attitudes from their families. For example, BK found that one family member didn't understand why she was pursuing recovery or the process through which she practiced it, often asking her provocative

questions. CC noted that she felt like her family babied her in early recovery, which she found unhelpful.

Improved Relationships in Recovery

Although many peers expressed difficulties with their changing relationships in early recovery as a young person, almost every person I interviewed also shared at least one example of an improved relationship, too.

DC and MD talked about how their parenting improved. DC reflected, “I feel like I am a better parent,” and added, “I feel present. I’m more aware. I remember things.” MD shared that he was able to begin rebuilding his relationship with his daughter because of his recovery.

Many peers were especially happy to share improved relationships with their parents. WJ shared that his recovery was a sense of pride for his mom, who often shared with him that “She’s very proud [he’s] in recovery.”

DC and UI both voiced a greater ability to express empathy towards other people; for DC, this came in the form of having more understanding for a family member who was also in recovery. UI shared that they had “grown to understand” one family member more than before and had “more empathy for who she is and where she’s come from.”

Some interviewees also added specifically that many relationships became deeper and stronger because of their recovery. ZL reflected that his relationship with his partner grew, and shared, “I didn’t realize how much I was closing myself off and putting a wall up in a way because of my relationship with substances.” He added that, “sobriety has given me the opportunity to see things clearer and given me that chance to really grow.”

With his friendships, LA shared, “I feel like I have deeper friendships than I’ve ever had” because of his recovery. Similarly, SP reflected that in recovery, his sense of trust came back, along with “meaningful conversations” and “genuine laughter.”

A Time of Change

Recovery is a time of change, and when this process also coincides with young adulthood, this change can feel monumental for the people going through it.

Entering recovery as a young person is scary. Many people may be scared that the relationships in their life will change. Conducting the Peer Voices Project showed me that relationships certainly will change in recovery—whether it’s with your family, friends, romantic partners, or other people in your life.

However, as many interviewees expressed, this was not a bad thing in their lives, though for some it was hard at the time they experienced it. In the end, it was powerful

to hear so many positive outcomes from the peers I interviewed. I hope that if there is any young person out there who is contemplating making a change, hearing these stories of monumental growth may provide some comfort in the journey that is recovery.