

Blog #1: Finding Recovery in Young Adulthood

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

What is it like to seek out recovery as a young person?

Pursuing recovery from addiction can be a daunting task for anyone, and it is particularly challenging for young adults, who must navigate a world of recovery largely made up of people who are older than them.

In recovery spaces, we often hear messaging like, “it’s never too late to enter recovery.” This is a powerful message; and often, I have found other young people in recovery asking an equally important question: is it ever too *early*?

I would venture to say no, and I wanted to get my peers’ thoughts on the matter. What has it been like for them to seek out recovery as young adults? How old were they when they first began thinking about recovery? How about when they made a change? What was their life like around this time? How did they feel?

By conducting peer interviews, some clear patterns emerged. Many interviewees shared about how difficult their life was when they struggled with addiction. DC says that her life was hectic while struggling in active addiction. Similarly, UI says that in active addiction, life was chaotic, that they were “in a really mentally dark place” and that they “didn’t want to really be [here] anymore.”

And what about when they made that decision to actively seek out recovery? What was this endeavor like for my peers as young people? DC shared that “life was really heavy” in her first year of recovery. MD says that he was a nervous wreck, and that the prospect of recovery “was awkward,” “weird,” and “uncomfortable.”

Was it indeed too early? Some felt like it may have been in the moment. SP reflected that he felt like “it wasn’t [his] time yet” and that he felt “too young for recovery.” BA shared a similar sentiment and added that beginning her recovery “was intimidating” because everyone else she had met in recovery was much older than she was. She shared that she made “misconceptions” about recovery because of this and said “at first I thought recovery was for people in their 40s.” CC shared a similar feeling, sharing that she felt out of place because of her young age at many recovery meetings.

It is true that in many recovery communities, the average age has historically skewed older than 30. [In 2011, SAMSHA reported that the national average age when someone entered substance use treatment was 34 \(NIH\)](#). This statistic doesn’t consider people who don’t go to treatment and still pursue recovery, [but](#)

one study by The Recovery Research Institute, which reported on the average age of attendees at recovery meetings, found that the average age was 41. This means that there is some truth in BA's misconception about recovery being for people in their 40s. Although recovery is for anyone, the average person many people see pursuing recovery (such as in recovery meetings) is middle-aged.

Age as a Barrier

Throughout my interviews with young people in recovery, it was a shared sentiment that they were often the youngest person in the room. And even before entering treatment, the prospect of not having peers around the same age was certainly something that some peers identified as getting in the way of their recovery, or at least something that threatened to. Another peer, LA, shared that his age of 22 “was definitely one of the barriers” of admitting he had a problem with substances. He says that he “felt like [he] was so young” to be struggling with addiction and that he had “never seen anyone young that got sober.”

Preemptively, some peers expressed concern about a potential lack of connection with others before beginning their recovery. Upon entering treatment, LA shared, “the only question [he] really had when [he] talked to someone in the intake team was ‘are there [going to] be other young people there?’”

He was worried he “wouldn't be able to relate with anyone.” ZL had this fear, too. He shared he “felt like people wouldn't take [him] or [his] recovery seriously” because of his age, though in reality he was “surprised how seriously it was taken when [he] began sharing [his] experience with alcohol more and making the decision to really attempt to get sober.”

These interviews serve as evidence that people who enter recovery at a young age may feel out of place in recovery spaces because of their age or at least worry about feeling this way before they decide to seek recovery. This is a clear barrier for many young people. And despite this barrier, it is also a reality that young people, especially those aged 18-25, “[have] been found to be most at risk for alcohol and other drug related problems” (NIH).

So, what can we do to shrink this barrier for young people wanting to pursue recovery?

Representation is the Way

Representation is the experience of seeing other people like you in real life spaces and media. An example may include someone who is gay seeing a gay character in a TV show. In real life, this may apply to young people in recovery: by seeing other people in recovery around their age, it makes them feel comfortable and assured that they can do it, too.

Representation makes people feel seen, understood, validated, and heard. For many peers who discussed their age having been a barrier to seeking out recovery, this was an experience that was either missing from their experience or one that they feared would be missing.

So, how can we help?

At its core, representation starts with presence. As stated above, in many of the interviews conducted, peers shared that they were often the youngest people in the recovery spaces they occupied. This is representation. By showing up and taking up space, these peers act as representation for other young people who may see them when they decide to try out recovery.

Elevating peer voices is also vital to lessening the barrier many people feel that is young age. It is not enough to create programming for young people (though this is certainly an excellent place to start). We must keep the voices of young people in recovery at the center of what we do and always include them in any plans we make. In practice, this looks like hiring young people, getting feedback on programming ideas, creating committees and advisory boards composed of young people, and leaning on the experience and input of young people regarding any type of programming designed for them.

It is also often not enough to rely only on the identity of recovery for the basis of connection. Although many of our experiences of addiction and recovery are similar, our experiences as young people are also as equally shaping in how we live our lives. Because of this, many young people in recovery find that building connections with other young people in recovery is helpful in addition to inter-generational support.

For many of us, although we find the recovery stories of older folks to be inspiring on our recovery journey, we also need to hear the recovery stories of other people around our age as well. Sometimes, it may not be enough to hear an older person say, “take it from me, I was young once.” What may help in addition to this is to hear another young person say, “Take it from me, I am your age. This is what I did with the knowledge I have at this point in my life. This is what helped me.”

Representation in addition to other lifestyle changes and support, as will be discussed in the next blog posts, is what young people in recovery have identified as being helpful in supporting their recovery journeys.

Sources:

[https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3940137/#:~:text=Young%20adulthood%20\(18%E2%80%9325%20years,marked%20by%20change%20and%20transition.](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3940137/#:~:text=Young%20adulthood%20(18%E2%80%9325%20years,marked%20by%20change%20and%20transition.)

<https://www.recoveryanswers.org/research-post/when-recovery-start-determining-personal-significance-start-dates-recovery-journeys/>