

RECOVERY VERSUS BEING RECOVERED



Wendy Oliver-Pyatt, MD, FAED, CEDS shares her personal perspective on being in recovery versus being recovered

Recovery is a process. Recovered is more like an outcome. Both are possible. They are connected, but they are different. On one hand, the recovery process begins to unfold when you have started to really develop the conviction that the eating disorder is no longer an option, and you are willing to do whatever it takes to recover. This is when the process of recovery really begins. However, you can *also* be in the process of your recovery, even before you have truly decided you have “had enough,” or when the conviction to recover has not fully set in; examples of when this may come up are when you are in treatment and are beginning to engage with another human being in a truly meaningful way, but are uncertain of your conviction to actually become recovered. Or perhaps you don’t really have the vision, the hope and the confidence that you can really become recovered; but you are willing to give it a shot, you are willing to step outside of your isolation and allow a new way, or new people into your world. During this phase you may have a lack of intention, or a lacking of strength to behave in a fully recovered way, but you are willing to engage in the process. In this case, you are in a healing phase, and you are *recovering* (even if you are very ambivalent about it!)

Alternatively, a person may have full conviction, intention, and determination to recover, and they may even be certain they will recover. This does not guarantee immediate results. So often, patients and families are confused. We live in a society that says, “Just do it!” When we try this, we do expect results! Nothing can be more difficult than to have the expectation if we just try hard enough, and want something enough, we are going to be able to “do it.” Time and time again, patients, families, and even providers are attached to this concept. This can lead to very difficult and even dangerous experiences for a person with an eating disorder. A frequent time we hear this mindset is when a patient or family says, “I am going to college in the fall, the structure will really help me” only to find that the stress, the demands, and the nature of a potentially triggering environment make things *worse* not better. Another situation this comes up is when a patient is willing to do everything expected of them in treatment, but not all the components of recovery are not integrated. Perhaps they will do as they are told, they will try and try and try. But this does not mean the person is fully engaging in treatment, or that they are aware of, sharing, and/or confronting the struggles in their life. Intention to recover does not equate with a guarantee that you are in a healing phase, or that all of the pieces are intact to lead to being fully recovered (the person may in fact underestimate their needs in general – a hallmark of all forms of eating disorders, and may underestimate what they *need* in order to recover.)

In some of my presentations I create a slide that reads: “Intention to Recover vs Healing Process.” What I am trying to point out is that one can have an intention to recover, yet not be engaging in a vulnerable and open relationship with others, or be developmentally able to process the emotions that leave them locked in the eating disorder *and* one *can* be in a healing process, even when they have very little, if any intention to recover.

Becoming recovered is when you have both healing process and intent operating simultaneously, to some extent. For me, personally, I became recovered when I was truly sick and tired of my eating disorder ways, and was willing to do whatever it took to recover. It was still trial and error, but I refused to be controlled by a mandated weight or size, and furthermore, I fully rejected the idea that restriction of my calories would ever bring me happiness, peace or fulfillment. I abandoned the pursuit of weight loss, and instead pursued the practice of mindful eating, and ultimately mindful living. I continued on the trajectory of healing, despite set backs and struggles.

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To me, this is a little bit like learning to play the piano. When you first begin, you have to practice measure-by-measure, line-by-line, sometimes right hand alone, sometimes left hand alone. You mistake the F sharp for an F over and over, and have to re-do certain parts of the piece over and over. It seems like it will never work! This is the recovery process. The amount of time and energy this takes is individual to each specific person and their circumstance. What shockingly happens when you are committed to the process is the most amazing. Through this intention, and this process, eventually you play this music “by heart”...meaning no written music is necessary. Isn't that kind of funny? When you master a piece, and play it without any music, we call it playing “by heart.” That is a little bit what it feels like to become recovered. Over and over you practice and fail at mindful eating. Just like over and over you fail to play that piece of music without errors. But you keep coming back to it. And eventually the song comes out of you, versus being forced. The piece is played without the written music, and when you are playing it, you are not fighting your way through it. It flows.

I think this is why it is *so* important to remember the distinction between the terms “recovery” and “recovered.” Here is what my friend, Carolyn Costin says about being recovered: “Being recovered, to me, is when the person can accept his or her natural body size and shape and no longer has a self destructive or unnatural relationship with food or exercise. When you are recovered, food and weight take a proper perspective in your life and what you weigh is not more important than whom you are; in fact, actual numbers are of little or no importance at all. When recovered, you will not compromise your health or betray your soul to look a certain way, wear a certain size or reach a certain number on a scale.”

A person may not yet have the strength, conviction, confidence or trust needed to leave the eating disorder paradigm. This process cannot always be “willed.” It is an uncertain and mysterious process for a person to develop a sense of trust with self and/or a connection to self that really allows you to be exposed and vulnerable, or be open to a new way of experiencing food (and life.)

Recovery is when you are able to combine the process of recovering, with a willful intention to recover, and you are willing to do whatever it takes for as long as it takes to train or retrain yourself to live a life guided by mindfulness.

Being recovered means that I am not living my life based on weight, shape, or being focused on food. Being recovered is not “white knuckling” it. It is like playing the piano from heart. I am living life based on my heart, by intellect, and my “inner compass.” This also means I am not attached to outside approval, and am not wed to avoiding all conflict. I am thankful I stumbled across Mindful Eating/Intuitive Eating when I did in my life. Had I not, I don't know if I would have ever recovered. What is most important to me now is that my attention and energy are actually available to me to live according to my values and according to what really excites me. Being recovered is not something I think about a lot – but deep down it is always something I have gratitude for.

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