

Recovery as an Overarching Philosophy

Introduction: The Healing Forest—A Metaphor for Communities of Recovery

Don Coyhis, president and founder of White Bison, an American Indian nonprofit charitable organization, developed the concept of the Healing Forest as part of the [Wellbriety Movement](#). The Healing Forest focuses on Native Americans returning to wellness from the many behavioral health challenges they have experienced. Although the original idea of the Healing Forest focused on sobriety issues among Native Americans, this profound concept is relevant and applicable to all people living with or in recovery from substance use challenges.

The creation of the Healing Forest—that is, strong communities of recovery—translates across cultures and traditions, promoting philosophies in which services support the individual and family in ways that are appropriate to and resonate with them. Using this concept, Access to Recovery (ATR) grantees can view their entire systems as forests where:

- Good soil promotes strong foundations of recovery and sustains the recovery journeys of individuals, their families, and other supporters, as well as the community at large.
- Services at all levels of care align with concepts of recovery-supporting systems.
- Services and systems align and resonate with the social determinants of health.

How Can This Technical Assistance Package Help Grantees?

This technical assistance (TA) package discusses the concepts of recovery as an overarching philosophy that supports the recovery journeys of people, families, and communities. Readers will be able to:

- Discuss social determinants of health and their connection to recovery and the development of recovery-supporting communities of care.
- Define recovery as a philosophy under which supporting services are delivered to individuals on their recovery journeys.
- Identify ways in which culture and language affect recovery and why reframing thinking and language in response to recovery-supporting services and support in behavioral health is critical.

What Is the Healing Forest?

The Wellbriety Movement uses the Healing Forest model to encourage sobriety and promote both recovery and community healing. In this metaphor, a forest contains malnourished trees that are plagued by wide-reaching ailments and are slowly dying. A single tree is removed from the forest, cared for, and nursed back to health in nutrient-rich soil with plenty of sunlight. Slowly, the bark strengthens and the leaves regain their green hues. Once the tree is well, it is brought back to its forest and replanted. At first, the healthy tree stands firmly in the earth, surrounded by the sick trees. Yet, slowly the tree begins to wither once again, because the other trees surrounding it remain unhealthy. Rather than enlivening the rest of the forest, the once healthy tree becomes sick again and is soon indistinguishable from the other trees. The trees in the forest need an environment that is conducive to recovery, one that will allow all the trees to thrive—in other words, a Healing Forest.

This TA package kicks off the theme—the importance of a recovery-oriented philosophy—for all ATR TA packages and coffee break sessions for this contract year. These upcoming products will cover essential topics that strengthen a recovery-supporting philosophy. Figure 1 highlights the core elements of a recovery-supporting philosophy and displays the topics covered in the upcoming TA packages and coffee break sessions. At the heart of a recovery-oriented philosophy are person- and family-centered, inclusive, and collaborative values and goals¹, as described in Table 1.

Figure 1. Recovery is an Overarching Philosophy

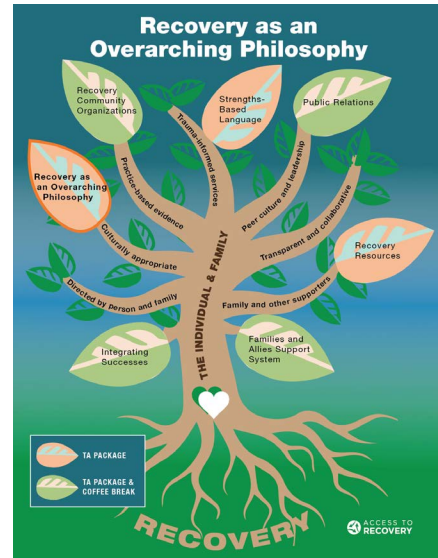


Table 1. A Recovery-Oriented Philosophy’s Values and Goals Center on Individuals, Families, and Communities

Values	Goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person-directed services and support are delivered in strengths-based and culturally appropriate ways using trauma-informed philosophies. • Communities in which people and families live, work, and play are included intentionally. • Families and other significant supporters of individuals in recovery are seen as partners in the recovery process. • The voice of lived experience is honored intentionally, and the culture reflects that. • The care provided addresses both behavioral and physical health needs. • The safety and care of children and adolescents are paramount. • Efforts to promote transparency and collaboration exist at all levels. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote services and support that are fully integrated. • Develop and foster person- and family-directed systems of care. • Promote recovery and the development of resilience and hope through services and support. • Ensure continuous quality improvement. • Identify systemic barriers that affect access to care. • Develop recovery- and resilience-oriented and informed services, training, and supervision. • Use evidence-based, -suggested, and informed approaches that are relevant for the people receiving them. • Develop service teams that are collaborative, integrated, and inclusive.

Part 1. Social Determinants of Health and the Connection to Personal Recovery and Recovery-Supporting Communities

Social determinants of health are sets of environmental, social, economic, and personal factors that directly affect quality of life and the health and wellness of individuals, families, and communities. Healthcare providers are using social determinants of health, as presented in Figure 2, to improve the overall health of the nation’s people, families, and communities.

Both personal and environmental factors contribute to the overall health and wellness of individuals, families, and communities. People with access to safe neighborhoods and communities, sound educational systems, employment opportunities, and preventive and health-promoting behavioral and physical healthcare often experience health and wellness across their lifespans. Conversely, the interaction between individuals and poor, unsafe social and physical environments often causes or exacerbates poor health outcomes. How and where we live, learn, work, and play affect our health and wellness.

Figure 2. Social Determinants of Health



Source: [HealthyPeople.gov Web site](http://HealthyPeople.gov)

Robert Wood Johnson Describes the Social Determinants of Health

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation emphasizes the importance of the social determinants of health. Through research, the foundation found that the following statements helped people understand the concept of social determinants of health more clearly because these statements (1) use conversational, values-driven language and engaging, relatable lifestyle references; (2) focus on solutions; and (3) acknowledge the role of personal responsibility:

- Health starts—long before illness—in our homes, schools, and jobs.
- All Americans should have the opportunity to make the choices that allow them to live a long, healthy life, regardless of their income, education, or ethnic background.
- Our neighborhood or job should not be hazardous to our health.
- The opportunity for health starts long before we need medical care.
- Health begins where we live, learn, work, and play.
- The opportunity for health begins in our families, neighborhoods, schools, and jobs.²

Inequity exists across the nation in relation to social determinants of health. Many communities labor under poor educational systems, deteriorated housing, unsafe neighborhoods, food and water insecurity, lack of employment opportunities, and extreme poverty. These factors contribute significantly to poor population health and wellness, and many of these factors generally exist in communities of color.

Keep an Eye on Nutrition

Places where people live and eat affect their diets. More than 23 million people, including 6.5 million children, live in food deserts—neighborhoods that lack access to stores where affordable healthy food is readily available (such as full-service supermarkets and grocery stores).³

Communities that support recovery, and the recovery journeys of people and families, are likely to provide support in other ways. Social determinants of health address population health in general. A recovery philosophy addresses not only population health, but also the health and wellness of people and families affected specifically by behavioral health challenges.

Stability Can Make All the Difference
 A range of personal, social, economic, and environmental factors contribute to the health of individuals and populations. For example, people with a quality education, stable employment, safe homes and neighborhoods, and access to preventive services tend to be healthier throughout their lives.³

Table 2 describes how an understanding of the overarching categories of social determinants of health is beneficial to recovery-supporting communities. For more information, please review the [World Health Organization's report, Social Determinants of Health: The Solid Facts.](#)



Table 2. Social Determinants of Health Inform Recovery-Supporting Communities

Economic	
Social Determinants of Health	Recovery-Supporting Communities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People have access to employment opportunities in their communities. • Employment opportunities promote fair wages and oppose discrimination, stigmatization, or unfair treatment of employees. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment and training opportunities exist for people in recovery, and communities intentionally educate employers about the benefits of hiring people with lived experience. • Training programs exist to prepare people with lived experience who want to work in the behavioral health field while concurrently preparing employers to act appropriately and affirming to peer culture and to people with lived experience in the workplace.
Educational	
Social Determinants of Health	Recovery-Supporting Communities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The school systems in communities are at least as good as those in the rest of the nation, and graduation rates are high. • Many graduates go on to higher education. • Incidences of bullying—especially bullying related to sexual orientation, gender, gender expression, or nationality/ethnicity—are low or nonexistent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher education opportunities exist for people with lived experience to enroll in degree and certificate programs in behavioral health. • Educational opportunities exist for people with lived experience in the skill or trade of their choice. • Service providers and recovery support providers promote education for people with lived experience and provide opportunities to those who wish to enter the behavioral health field. • Secondary schools and institutions of higher education visibly promote recovery and people who are recovering by creating safe spaces for them, offering regular presentations on recovery from alcohol and other drug challenges by recovering youth, and hosting events that celebrate recovery.

Community	
<p>Social Determinants of Health</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People and families have access to safe, adequate, and affordable housing and to safe parks, playgrounds, and sidewalks. • Neighborhoods are walkable. • People have access to grocery stores and to affordable fresh food. • The community has strong values and morals that members understand and promote. • Community service providers—such as firefighters, police officers, and emergency medical technicians—are part of the fabric of the neighborhood and work collaboratively with community members to ensure the best quality of life for everyone. 	<p>Recovery-Supporting Communities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All people receive safe, affordable housing opportunities regardless of their behavioral health challenges. • The community does not reject people based on religion/spirituality, sexual orientation, gender/gender identity or expression, nationality/ethnicity, physical/cognitive ability, or behavioral health status. • People and families have the opportunity to live in their communities of choice, and those communities understand what it takes to support continued recovery. • Local government, police, fire and rescue, emergency medical services, and other community infrastructure are viewed as partners with the rest of the community and are committed to keeping the community safe. • Health fairs, community forums, and celebrations ensure regular interaction among people and families in the community, prevention and treatment providers, community service and recovery support providers, physical health providers, and community infrastructure. • Messaging is designed to educate the community in general not only on the presence of local services but also on ways to prevent behavioral health challenges. • Messaging is appropriate for the communities receiving it and begins early with young children because, from birth through old age, the conditions in the physical and social environments in which people live, work, play, and age can have profound influence on their health and wellness.

Part 2. Cultural Confidence: Reframing Thinking and Language To Promote a Philosophy of Recovery

Reframing thinking and language in response to developing recovery-supporting services is challenging, especially when that language is so deeply ingrained among healthcare practitioners and is part of a larger healthcare framework. The healthcare field tends to be paternalistic and expert-driven. Recovery-supporting services reverse that paradigm; providers view the people seeking services, their families, and other supporters to be the experts. To adequately respond to this paradigm shift, the healthcare field must adopt a *new language*.

“Words are among the most powerful tools for communication that human beings have at their disposal. They can be used to heal, motivate, inform, build capacity and consensus, inspire, praise, and educate. Unwittingly, and often with no intent at malice, they can also be used to minimize, marginalize, pathologize, stigmatize, and oppress.”⁴

—Sade Ali, **Social Healing Words—Using Language to Promote Recovery and Resilience for Individuals, Families, and Communities**

The Endnotes section of this TA package cites a booklet *Social Healing Words—Using Language to Promote Recovery and Resilience for Individuals, Families, and Communities*, with suggestions related to basing the language of behavioral health in strengths rather than deficits. The Office of National Drug Control Policy is also creating a glossary of terms to help encourage the national movement toward using less stigmatizing, emotion-laden, and deficit-based language that often keeps individuals and families from accessing much-needed services and support.

Conclusion

Since the late 1990s, *recovery* and *recovery-oriented systems of care* have been buzz words in behavioral health. They emerged from Talking Circles in Tribal communities; the fellowships of Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and similar 12 Step and mutual help organizations; the mental health advocacy movement; and mental health reform. For a time it was thought that these concepts would fall out of favor like so many interventions and techniques; however, technology, new thoughts and ideas, and outcome-based reimbursement have driven a paradigm shift.

In general, early adopters of the philosophies that define personal recovery for individuals and their families and recovery-supportive service systems report people's greater satisfaction with services, less use of costly care, and higher retention. Burn out, which is common among behavioral health staff members, decreases when relationships improve between them and the individuals and families with whom they partner, when providers treat those who come for services as equal partners in the care they receive, and when these providers expect that the individuals they serve will do well.

The primary goal of *recovery as a philosophy* in the community is to create an environment that promotes hope and healing naturally for all who are served and their families. This environment encourages and promotes connectedness, interdependence, and wellness. It is grounded in supporting and including its members, helping them to feel empowered by taking ownership and responsibility for their own health and wellbeing. The act of creating communities that both promote and support recovery means providing individuals with safe places to heal, places and ways to contribute to others, and environments that support the growth of individuals and families. Together, these efforts factor positively into the creation of healthier lifestyles for all involved.

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Additional Resources

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