

Emerging From the Shadows, Beyond Existing into Mattering and Belonging,
Developing the Science of Flourishing in Addiction Recovery – William Stauffer & Dr David Best

This essay was coauthored with Dr. David Best, an internationally recognized researcher in addiction recovery whose work has been central to advancing the science of recovery capital, social networks, and community-based pathways to long-term change. As coauthor, he brings decades of empirical research and global perspective on how connection, belonging, and social identity underpin the process of recovery and human flourishing and a shared appreciation for the role and function of community level recovery capital in the initiation and sustainment of long-term addiction recovery.

In Plato's Allegory of the Cave, prisoners have been chained in a cave, with dim shadows on the wall their only reality. One person breaks those chains and emerges to see the world, rich in sensory stimuli and opportunity. They return to the cave to free those still in bondage and are met with resistance. Dim shadows are all the captives have. They feared that change would result in complete darkness. The parable reminds us of the importance of enlightenment, resilience and the duty to return and free others even if these tasks are arduous, and of the importance of being guided on the path, not to the destination which the person must discover for themselves.



Plato's allegory is a representation of our addiction treatment and recovery support system. For those who can get help, services are constrained primarily to short-term stabilization goals geared to acute individual improvement. It is rarely measured or tracked beyond the first glimmers of light that emerge within a person, and the measurement is of residual indicators of darkness, not of the illumination provided by the light. If our service system were an educational system, our standard would be a D grade for all students. We fail to account for or support their true capacity. Instead, we focus on gains such as not overdosing. To stay alive and maybe out of jail. And as the 'experts', professionals convey those expectations to those they work with, stifling ambition and hope in doing so. Expecting nothing more in respect to the innate human capacity to flourish and contribute to society. A world of limited opportunity and dark shadows becomes fulfilled prophecy by system design.

Post Traumatic Growth and Flourishing in Addiction Recovery

Consistent with the allegory of the cave, William White's recent essay, [Post Traumatic Growth and Flourishing in Addiction Recovery: A Critical Review and Commentary](#) is a torch that can lead us out of the dark well of addiction and low expectations of recovery. Humans are driven to actualize on the individual level and within their respective tribes. To matter and to belong. The task before us is to make this journey available to all those still chained in the caves of addiction and despair. Change like this will invariably face broad resistance as acute, fragmented programming designed to meet limited goals is all we have ever known. The human rights concept of capabilities is central to this approach of flourishing that is personal, contextual and evolving as individuals grow and learn.

While our treatment and recovery support systems are designed within a individually oriented service design, recovery is relational and community grounded. As people in recovery grow beyond acute stabilization into long term recovery, it is often fueled by service to others and within an association of similarly oriented people. These recovery communities extend a rich ecosystem for people to belong, to matter and to contribute to the betterment of the group, and beyond the group, to the betterment of their community and society. When Hibbert and Best (2011) discussed the concept of “better than well” to summarise data showing higher quality of life scores in people in long-term recovery than in the general public, it is no surprise that the domains of quality of life that were significantly enhanced were social and environmental – people in recovery were more socially embedded and more invested in their neighbourhoods.

The invitation for social inclusion and access to meaningful service roles determine recovery trajectories in synergistic ways. Growth multiples. As White [describes in his paper, \(page 3\)](#) in respect to how flourishing occurs within the recovery process:

Addiction recovery involves processes of subtraction (a foundational state of problem reduction/ elimination), addition (enhanced global health and social functioning), and multiplication (growth synergies that produce heightened levels of meaning and social contribution far greater than that which existed prior to the addiction experience).

The processes of recovery flourishing supports growth for each respective member and their whole communities as a force multiplier. Vital and inclusive recovery environments are critical to recovery trajectories, and these community level processes either reside outside of our care delivery system or occur despite system design as the focus has been historically individual and acutely oriented.

This is at the heart of the science of flourishing in addiction recovery. Much of what we know about these processes we know from examining how mutual aid processes work. These processes have tended to reside outside of our traditional service design or in instances within these structures they were more organic than intentional. A broad consequences for our failure to understand or allow for indigenous recovery community processes of growth and support. While we are beginning to expand our associated knowledge base, it remains limited in respect to the context of community over the long term. What we do know suggests a vast untapped potential of reciprocal growth with recovery communities embedded in the wider community and each supporting the growth of the other through processes of connection, cohesion and trust.

Perseverance and Grit at the Individual and Community Level

People who sustain recovery over the long term develop perseverance along the way and communities can also become more tenacious with effort. We are learning that perseverance is a key indicator of success with any endeavor including recovery. People who see setbacks as temporary barriers to be overcome through effort tend to succeed over time. They learn that the wise people in your life were right when they suggested you hang out with people who are succeeding. This practice helps you see and learn how to better overcome obstacles and to keep going until you reach a greater capacity to flourish. Flourishing like recovery more generally is not a linear process.

As Winston Churchill once famously said, "success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts." To get an A, other than the most gifted pupils, students require what [Dr Angela Duckworth termed 'grit'](#) or the power of perseverance. She found when she investigated which cadets ended up graduating from West Point. It was not the smartest privileged kids who succeeded, it was those who kept trying no matter what. We can develop grit in people and within our communities. We need a collaborative recovery community [focused on its responsibilities](#) to each other and the future. We need to build a system that sees our potential even when we do not see it in ourselves.

Recovery is a collective journey of perseverance in overcoming barriers from which resilience emerges. People thrive in groups. We see this as peer support helps move recovery initiates into long term recovery within

community. Recovery community is that gritty group that becomes the incubator to flourish. To strengthen flourishing processes, we must better understand these dynamics and what we can do to augment them. A part of this, that is a world away from specialist treatment and its scientific underpinnings, is the concept of mutual benefit and reciprocated flourishing as a shared experience.

We do not get students to achieve A's if our expectation is that they are only capable of achieving a D grade. We do not tell students that a D is all they can accomplish in life. Instead, we believe in their capacity even in instances where it is not readily visible. In this way we support lifting them up into the realm of their untapped and invisible capacity. This is why if you hang out with D students you will be more than satisfied with a C, but if you spend your time with people who know more than you, you will likely rise to a better grade, perhaps even an A. Recovery community is filled with people who have become better versions of themselves. They model success for recovery initiates. Our treatment and recovery systems have set the bar far too low. What is more, they not only got an A, but they also live and embody it for others to study and emulate.

Measuring and Expanding the Process of Flourishing in Recovery

For us to make progress in conceptualizing and operationalizing the process of flourishing in recovery we will need to measure it, which will also require a [recovery definition of utility](#) that can help researchers quantify global improvements in wellness that are durable over time (Kelly, Stauffer 2025). We have a veritable cottage industry of aspirational definitions of recovery that defy measurement. Aspirational definitions that cannot be measured may increase recovery pessimism in the general public without a measurable evidence base. To overcome this pessimism, we must begin to define when and where recovery flourishing occurs, its elements and how it is sustained and spreads in groups and communities.

Measurements of recovery flourishing would require us to consider:

- Processes that support people feeling valued and valuable, that their efforts mattered and they have authentic roles in contributing to the needs of their communities.
- Cultural and community nuances to support the rich variation in how and where people recover in the context of their life experiences.
- How much of what has been developed in our field has come from the experiential knowledge of the recovery community and we need to understand how to adapt and improve experiential strategies without coopting them away from the originating communities.
- How people begin to experience growth and worth in recovery and how this is sustained and nurtured across the life span from point of imitation to long term recovery.
- Understanding how we actualize on an individual and community level to strive towards our full potential.
- For individuals in recovery and members of their family constellations to find their purpose and passion.

Moving forward, our central aim should be to shift the field from focusing on short term stabilization through the initiation of individual recovery to one that intentionally measures and supports flourishing as the primary outcome we are focused on over the long term. Flourishing in this way is framed not as the absence of symptoms but as an exceptional level of global health that centers on meaning, purpose, and social contribution that can exceed pre-addiction functioning. This requires new conceptual and measurement tools, as current systems remain oriented toward pathology reduction rather than capturing and augmenting growth, contribution, and a high quality of life for everyone. We must move beyond systems calibrated to minimal goals like avoiding death or sustaining basic stability which systematically suppress the possibility of flourishing by design. For recovery scientists, we need to think both beyond corporeal boundaries to understanding the spread of flourishing and recovery growth, and beyond the narrow confines of symptom reduction to capture metrics of existential growth and the metrics of connection and belonging, of feeling valued and adding value.

This reorientation reflects a broader philosophical shift: from pathology management to strength-building, where recovery is understood as a process of subtraction, addition, and ultimately multiplication of strengths and capacities. These strengths are not isolated traits but emerge within an ecological and relational context of

families, communities, and cultures that either constrain or enable growth. Flourishing is therefore both deeply personal and inherently social, expressed through connection, contribution, and participation. At the same time, it is individualized and dynamic, unfolding differently across different communities, people of varying cultures and over time, shaped by life circumstances, opportunities, and evolving shared identity. Echoing the tradition of developmental thinkers such as Maslow, flourishing is not a fixed endpoint but a fluid, developmental process, one that may advance, plateau, or regress, reflecting the ongoing human drive toward meaning, potential, and self-transcendence within changing life contexts.

Sources

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