

Restoring American Community – Recovery Community as a Catalyst

“Let us use whatever power and influence we have, working with whatever resources are already available, mobilizing the people who are with us to work for what they care about.” – Margaret Wheatley

We are losing community and connection with each other across our nation. It is a key driver of drug use. People cope with boredom, isolation, and despair by getting high to feel relief. We have become a nation of lonely, isolated people who far too often use alcohol and other drugs as our “go to feel good tool” as community and connection erodes. We will need to do a myriad of things to turn the loss of community across our country around, but one of the key things we can do is strengthen community-based recovery efforts. We should do so because recovery revitalizes community.

Community takes many forms. It transcends geographic proximity. A community is any group of people who come together for common purpose. Recovery community is community, and part of the vital fabric of our society, a healing force largely hidden from public view. Recent posts on the subject include Building Bridges Between Islands of Healing in January 2022 and reposted [earlier this year](#). The title was inspired by [Margaret J. Wheatley, *Who Do We Choose To Be?: Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity*](#) (2017). The other, more recently [Social Movements End – So How Will Ours End](#) highlights our success and future potential to help heal our communities and erosive forces that risk pulling apart those efforts.



To understand what is unfolding on a macro level, consider the [Global Trust Deficit Disorder: A Communications Perspective on Trust in the Time of Global Pandemics](#). Their 2023 report is titled “[Navigating a Polarized World](#).” It observes our world is increasingly divided and dangerously fragmented. How much or how little we trust our institutions has very real consequences for our collective health and wellbeing. Quite simply, we do not form or sustain community with people we do not trust. Societies require shared trust to sustain themselves. Without it, members become isolated and society withers. The loss of hope, trust and sense of community all contribute to increased rates of addiction. Do we have the capacity to change this? I certainly think so. We must. Future generations depend on us doing so.

The loss of hope, trust and sense of community is a major (although not the only) driving factor in the increase of substance use within our society. It is perhaps a greater factor than trauma, which is what conventional wisdom currently considers to be the primary driver of addiction in our society. We have long had high rates of trauma in society. Do we think there is more trauma now than in other dark eras in our history? As a student of history, I don’t think so. What we do not have in our times is strong community bonds and deep connection to each other. We do not share identity or goals; we are an isolated people. Humans are simply not wired for isolation. Social determinates of health require connective tissue. We lack it. Rebuilding community and restoring hope, trust and shared purpose require these key ingredients. Efforts to do so start at the end of our noses.

If we are to deliver a functional society to the next generation, we must rebuild our community and sense of connection to each other. What stops us from acting in this way? There is a perception of some short-term gain that erodes a focus on the common good. Screw you, I got mine. This is known as the tragedy of the commons. [Supporting Long term Recovery and the Tragedy of the Commons](#) talks about how this occurs in the recovery community, but it is also a larger societal dynamic. We can ill afford any further erosion of our common bonds. This is our collective moral imperative. The term Moral Imperative was crystallized by [Immanuel Kant](#) who described it as the link between pure reason and acting correctly - what we might describe today as “doing the right thing.” Restoring community is a right thing.

Recovery community is a part of that connective tissue. It is also true that as in recovery, our well-being as a society depends on each other. People in recovery live this. We know we depend on each other to stay alive. We form community despite vast diversity in socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. Bikers and business leaders, atheists and religious people, black, brown, red, yellow, and white seeing their common interests as greater than any differences

that exist. Powerful stuff. We hold common ground with people very different from us other than in one important way, the common experience of addiction and recovery. In this way, we know how important community is, which is why we often get involved in service in a myriad of ways. We become [civically engaged and achieve significant personal goals while rebuilding familial bonds](#). We are part of the solution, and we want to help.

One of the most significant challenges to revitalizing communities is that we tend to go about it all wrong. We develop services FOR community provided BY organizations as our primary intervention model. What is needed to revitalize community is diverse communities developing and implementing their own solutions, which in turn supports their own asset building and their shared sense of common purpose. This is not how we typically do things. To change this, we must place community at the center of interventional models. Community must not be viewed as a marketplace for services, but as the primary change agent in its own right. Concepts highlighted in the work of John McKnight and Peter Block in their book [The Abundant Community, Awakening the Power of Families & Community](#).

Community building is an inside job. We should consider that:

- 1. Communities can and do their best when they self-define their own manners of healing.** External agents who prescribe solutions or only add in community members after plans are predetermined rob communities of their own inherent capacity to actualize. Stigma and bias often drive the externalization of goal development. Members are patronized, not empowered. There should be no wonder why addiction is having a greater impact on marginalized communities. Our systems treat them paternalistically as passive recipients and not formidable change agents in their own right. This is a form of theft. Resources remain outside of the impacted community. People are commodified instead of empowered. This is particularly true in respect to marginalized communities.
- 2. If we want to strengthen community, we must change how we resource reparative strategies.** We tend towards a service orientation, providing things to people rather than supporting collective problem resolution. In the recovery space, the original grants that focused on recovery community had a support orientation and were titled “Recovery Community Support Program” grants. It did not last long. Developing recovery community was shifted to serving the recovery community. The title changed to “Recovery Community Service Program” grants. The grants helped a lot of people, but we ended up with a service orientation, not a recovery community orientation. We failed to leverage the power of community more fully. Bill White warned in a 2013 address to the national recovery community and [subsequent paper](#) that “if the recovery advocacy movement morphs solely into a PRSS appendage to the addiction treatment system, the movement will have failed and will recreate conditions that will set the stage for a future revitalized recovery advocacy movement.” He ended up accurately forecasting exactly what unfolded.
- 3. Community plays a vital role in a healthy society.** The Edelman Trust Barometer suggests that lack of connection and trust is a global concern. Our nation was founded on the notion of voice and choice. We are strongest as a people when we build community and weakest when we allow it to erode. Building recovery community synergistically benefits society in ways beyond helping individuals heal from addiction. There is [some evidence](#) that just about everything we value like good health, economic growth and lower crime rates improve when people come together in recovery community and the things we do not want decrease. Communities are central to societal health, yet we do not focus efforts on building it, in the recovery sector or beyond. We must hold community up as a central facet of our collective wellbeing.

There is no time like the present for rebuilding community in America. The focus of this piece is on recovery community, but these concepts are just as applicable to communities beyond recover as well:

- 1. Recovery communities are the experts on what is needed in their own communities.** Recovery communities are diverse, and our efforts must be supported and funded equitably. Designed by us to serve our own communities in ways that work for us. Anything less is patronizing and erodes the power of community.
- 2. Discrimination and stigma erode healing.** Systems that tokenize us perpetuate discrimination. One does not tokenize people they respect. No group that tokenizes the impacted community ends up helping it, they are only helping themselves. Discrimination is intrinsic to addiction recovery and unless change efforts address it everywhere it occurs, services too often perpetuate hurt disguised as healing.
- 3. System integrity and transparency matters a great deal.** Wherever there are vulnerable, marginalized communities there are snake oil sellers, hustlers, and hucksters. Our space has long been filled with these purveyors of self-dealing. The primary measure of the health of a service system may well be the focus on policing hurters who mask themselves under the guise of helpers. When we see it happen out in the open, which has far too often been the

case historically, it shows us that the institutions who are charged with helping our part of the problem as they look the other way.

We are faced with a moral imperative, to deliver a functional society to the next generation. The loss of connection is driving despair and drug use across our society. Ensuring people can and do recover from addictions and develop social capital in their communities is vital. It is also true that when we come together, we are stronger. History shows us that we are most effective when we do so, even as there are so many forces that keep us arguing over small things. The truth is we do not need to have strong institutions to build consensus and community, we can do that with and for each other.

What do you want the next generation to inherit in respect to a functional society that supports recovery [from the leading cause of death in America](#)? It looks a lot like what many of us want. Let's build it together. It may well be hard, but the alternative is far harder. We have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

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