



## Understanding Abstinence, Sobriety, and Recovery

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### ABSTINENCE

Many teenagers believe that “if Mom or Dad would only stop drinking, everything would be fine.” “Life will be so much better if the drinking would stop.” “I’ll get ‘my Dad’ back if he could just throw the pills away.”

It is true that alcohol can stimulate other unwanted behaviors, and when the drinking or substance use stops some of these behaviors stop as well. A drunk parent may become mean, a father may spend a great deal of money on alcohol or drugs, or a mother may be negligent of caring for younger children when drunk and passed out. Unfortunately, however, when a person stops drinking or drugging, the family problems don’t disappear completely. The reality is that stopping the behavior, or abstinence, is a very important first step of a process that leads to sobriety and recovery. So, what do these other terms mean?

**The absence of alcohol or drugs does not mean the same as “recovered.” Getting “clean and sober” is the first step so that recovery can begin. – Sis Wenger, NACoA CEO/President**

### SOBRIETY

When a person who is addicted to alcohol or drugs stops using, the brain starts to change. At first, because the brain believes the body needs the alcohol to live, it can be much harder to be around a person who continues to not drink. In the beginning, it may actually feel like things are getting worse instead of better. As time continues – as a person remains sober – the brain starts to change in ways that are positive. Yes this is a good thing, and it helps a person become healthier. If the person is not attending to other issues that are part of the disease of alcoholism, it may not seem like things are getting better. 12 step programs like AA help address these issues to help attain and maintain recovery.

Think of it like a heart attack, where a person after the attack may need to change a number of behaviors (eating habits, exercise, sleep, length of time at work, stress management). The cardiac patient may also need to see other specialists to fully treat the problem to avoid more heart attacks. For an alcoholic, a person must consider many lifestyle changes, and seek additional treatment or attend 12-step meetings, in order to continue to get stronger and healthy after they stop drinking. Without this continued care, a person can get stuck feeling miserable because they aren’t drinking but they aren’t getting healthier. Oftentimes, people refer to this feeling of being stuck as being a “dry drunk.” Sometimes alternative bad behaviors even replace the drinking because they need something to help the bad feelings go away.

### RECOVERY

The easiest way to think about it is that sobriety is the continued state of not drinking and recovery is the process of healing a person physically and emotionally from the disease of addiction. Through the lifestyle changes, additional treatment and/or 12 step meetings, a person seeks to develop a healthy mind, sound body, and logical decision making. Recovery requires a regular commitment to working on better communication skills, healthier thinking, and effective mindfulness to find contentment in life. It is this contentment in mind, body and spirit that is often referred to as serenity.

**For family members, it can be hard and yet wonderful to watch these changes.**

The difficult part is accepting that things will need to change for each member of the family. The entire family may become very busy with attending different meetings throughout the week. The parent in early recovery may

attend a lot of 12 step meetings in the evenings or weekends. The other parent may start to attend Al-Anon every week. For teenagers, student assistance programs in school or Alateen meetings provide an opportunity to talk to other teens who understand about what is going on and how you feel about it. Family members may spend time on the phone talking with other people from these meetings instead of taking part in the regular family routine.

In addition, other changes may start to take place. A dad may visit the gym every day to exercise. Sometimes a parent decides to take the entire family to church. Maybe family outings become a priority on the weekend. Poor dinner habits may be replaced with nutritional meals full of vegetables. Maybe the popular weekend parties stop being held at the house. These changes seem very strange, even if they are good choices.

In recovery, through these many changes, you can watch your mom or dad transform into a person who is more available for the entire family, communicate in a healthier way, and overall appear more happy and content. The changes may look very different than how you imagined it would be when the drinking stopped. A parent in recovery is a person of greater understanding, gratitude and overall wellness that benefits the entire family.