A Matter of Life and Death — Why the Discourse Around Twelve Step Recovery and Women Needs to Change

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Discourse Defined

The noun *discourse* comes from the Latin *discursum* to mean "an argument."

or

A formal and intense discussion or debate.

or

An exchange of ideas through conversation (sometimes with great passion).

*vocabulary.com*
Learning Objectives

- Explore the concept of ‘individualized recovery patchworks’ for women
- Understand how Twelve Step recovery can be empowering and transformative for many women, but not work for others
- Explore the harm perpetuated when ‘multiple pathway’ proponents dismiss Twelve Step recovery as a recovery option
- Consider ‘steps’ that recovering individuals, professionals and programs can take to create a more unified recovery ethos

Our Why

From 1999 to 2017, the death rate from drug overdose among women aged 30-64 years increased by 260%
From 2018 to 2020, alcohol-related deaths increased by 14.7 percent per year for women, compared to 12.5 percent increase per year for men.
Women are at highest risk for developing a substance use disorder between the ages of 18-44 which largely coincides with their reproductive years.
Women are nearly twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with depression or be affected by eating disorders
Anxiety disorders affect about 40% of US women.
And also...

Unlocking our fullest potential as providers, allies and individuals in recovery requires us to continuously evolve our understanding of recovery and redefine it as we grow, not only for ourselves but also for future generations.

From Pathways to Patchworks

Recovery Pathways Are Not Always a Pathway
William White (2016)

The image of pathways suggests a crossroads with distinct options that call for clear decision-making or voiced guidance from some GPS of addiction recovery. The image conveys that one must choose A, B, or C – with some advocates of each standing at the crossroads claiming they represent the one true path to recovery.
There are millions of people living in recovery within these established frameworks of recovery, but there are also innumerable people in long-term recovery who have crafted a style of personal recovery at or beyond the boundaries of these approaches.

Their recovery experiences are "dynamically evolving" in the sense that critical ingredients are regularly being forged and exchanged without a predetermined map or fixed point of completion. Their recovery experiences are patchworks, mandalas, or mosaics in the sense that this style of recovery may combine unusual and even contradictory elements, the whole of which may resemble no established style of recovery.

We must be supported to find & follow individualized PATHWAYS & PATCHWORKS of recovery.
My Pathway is Better than Your Pathway

- The polarizing debate over whether Twelve Step Recovery is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for women serves no useful purpose – lives are being lost in the crossfire
- No one group, organization, or program has a monopoly on women’s healing.
- We have a responsibility to share freely about those modalities that might not be for us but may well save somebody else’s life.

“Many find recovery within a well-trod path, while others find recovery on the road less traveled. Still others will find recovery where no one has traveled before. Such differences do not need to be cast into categories of superiority and inferiority. All progressive movements toward and within recovery are cause for celebration-no matter how different the journey from our own.”

William White (2016)
“Neither I nor anyone else can take away someone’s program by speaking of other ways. When someone thinks I can, it is because they have not internalized their own belief system and are giving their power to another person.”

Charlotte Kasl (Many Roads One Journey: Moving Beyond the 12 Steps, 1992).
Twelve Step Recovery Does Work

“The strength of the scientific evidence is now more than sufficient to support the supposition that AA/TSF is a valid approach that is at least on par with, or superior to, other commonly used clinical interventions (e.g. CBTs, motivational interviewing [MI]-based treatments) and is more cost-effective.”

(Kelly & Abry, 2021)

Twelve Step Recovery Does Work

“One of the reasons why AA helps more people over the long-term is through its ability to keep people actively involved in its recovery-focused peer support social network over these long periods so that their brains and bodies can adjust to the absence of alcohol and the demands of recovery and help them adopt a new lifestyle that is more conducive and supportive to long-term stable remission and enhanced quality of life.”

(John Kelly)
Should I Stay?

Reasons women come and stay:
Connection and community
A prescribed process (with literature) for healing self, family and more
The focus on spirituality works for many
No cost
Variety of meeting groups and formats
Ability to mentor and / or be mentored
Service orientation
Etc.

Or...Should I Go?

Reasons women leave - or never come in:
Methods of identification, labels don't work
Perceived religiosity
Emphasis on hard bottoms
Toxic sponsorship practices
Relapse ‘shaming’
Sometimes unrealistic expectations around
  • Number of meetings
  • Amount of service required
Pressure to share
Judgment around doing ‘other work’
Stigma (self imposed, stigma associated with medications
Our Path(way) Forward

**Step One**
Admit there is no one size fits all approach to women’s recovery

**Step Two**
Believe in women – trust that they are competent and capable of knowing what works for them

**Step Three**
Trust that new, unfamiliar modalities also have the potential to save lives – try out some new things yourself

**Step Four**
Deeply examine our ideas about how women should recover – think and write about it

**Step Five**
Get curious and have brave, vulnerable discussions about our beliefs with people who believe differently

Our Path(way) Forward

**Step One**
Admit that Twelve Step recovery does work for millions of individuals / women (read the research)

**Step Two**
Believe women…who talk and write about how the amazing lives they lead because of Twelve Step recovery

**Step Three**
Don’t practice ‘contempt prior to investigation.’ Trust that older, more ‘traditional’ modalities do have the potential to save lives – try out some Twelve Step open meetings for women

**Step Four**
Deeply examine our ideas about how women should recover – think and write about it and while we are at it, think about the role of privilege in recovery.

**Step Five**
Get curious and have brave, vulnerable discussions about our beliefs with people who believe differently
Final-Ish Thoughts

Women are dying while recovery advocates and providers are arguing about how they should recover. Everyone has a responsibility to spread the truth – which is that there is no ‘one right’ way to recover. We need to strive for unity over uniformity.

The She Recovers Mission

To redefine recovery, inspire hope, end stigma and empower women in or seeking recovery from mental health issues, trauma, substance use, and related life challenges to increase their recovery capital, heal themselves and help other women to do the same.
INTENTIONS & Guiding Principles

We are all recovering from something.
We don't have to hit rock bottom to **Pursue Recovery** in any area of our lives. We believe in **Early Intervention**.

We must be **supported** to find & follow individualized **Pathways & Patchworks** of recovery.
Recovery is a **JOURNEY TO WHOLENESS**. We learn to **take care** of our body, mind, emotions & spirit.

We answer the call to heal our **past wounds** and **INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMAS** so we can live fully in the present.
We focus on our **strengths**, not our defects.
This is how we **change**.

We understand that the practice of **radical self-love** is paramount to our well-being.
We do our **individual work**
in order to create & hold healing
spaces for everyone. **ALL WOMEN**
deserve recovery.

When **we're ready**, we recover out loud so that women who are struggling can find &
**JOIN OUR MOVEMENT.**
Connection is our sole (soul) purpose. We're STRONGER TOGETHER.

FOR MORE Information

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By: Alison Jones Webb, MA, MPH

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By: Dave Kenney, PhD (cand.) and Susan Kenney, CHWC

February 14th, 2024

Know Your Neuro
By: Crystal Collier, PhD, LPC-S

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By: Debbie Gray, LICSW, LADC, LSCSW, LCAC

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Presented by Dawn Nickel, PhD
Thank You

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