



CONNECTION & BELONGING: VOICES OF PEOPLE IN RECOVERY

"I found out, through many years of recovery, that the more that I stay connected to people, stay social, and the less isolated I am, the better the chances of me staying sober. It is very significant in my personal recovery."

-Listening Session Participant



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Health Department**

SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

A Note of Gratitude

We are grateful for the bravery, openness, and trust that was shared with us by people in recovery, who made this report possible. The recovery community that we see today was built upon decades of work, relationship building, and dedication to help people find and move forward on their path of recovery. Thank you!

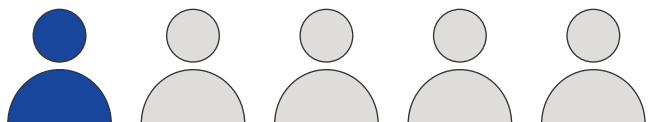
Social connectedness emerged as a priority through the [Winnebago County Community Health Assessment](#) when residents shared their feelings of being disconnected, isolated, and not supported. Since that time, efforts have been made to better understand the role that social and emotional support has on overall health and wellbeing of our community.

Community Health Survey findings demonstrate that people with mental health challenges and substance use disorders experience lower levels of social support than adults without these challenges in Winnebago County. Across the United States, 1 in 10 people are in recovery from substance use disorder according to the [2019 National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#). What can people in recovery teach us about how social connection and belonging can support the path of recovery?

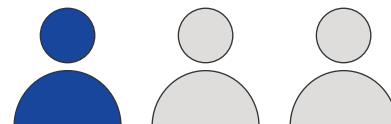
Listening sessions were held with members of the recovery community to learn how connection, belonging, and support impacts the recovery process. This report shares key themes from the listening sessions along with actions our community can take to strengthen social connection, improve support for people with substance use disorder and people in recovery, and how our community can be more recovery friendly.

ADULTS WITH MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS REPORT LOW LEVELS OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

(Winnebago County Community Health Survey, 2018)



1 out of 5 adults living in Winnebago County report not getting the **social and emotional support** they need when they need it.



1 out of 3 adults with **physical and mental health challenges**, including substance use disorder, do not get needed social and emotional support.

SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS IS DEFINED AS THE PRESENCE OF THESE THREE FACTORS:



STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

Having supportive people in your life who are there when you need them and being a trusted support for others.



SENSE OF BELONGING

Feeling valued and accepted within your community where you can be your true and authentic self.



MEANINGFUL CONTRIBUTION

Sharing care, gifts, interests, passions, service, and acts of kindness with the people around you.



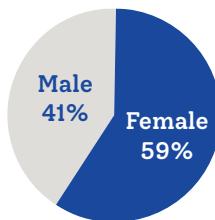
Participant Demographics

AGE RANGE

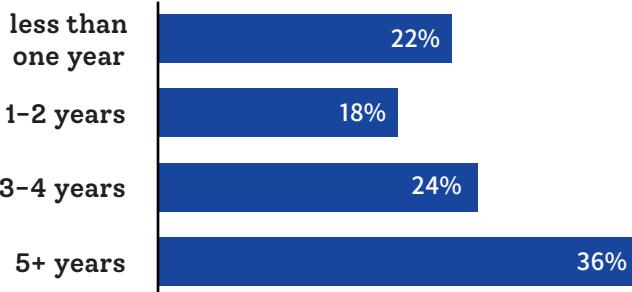


22-72
years old

GENDER



LENGTH OF RECOVERY



SUPPORTS AND SERVICES PARTICIPANTS NAMED AS MOST CRITICAL



- Sponsors
- Recovery group meetings
- Recovery activities
- Sober living housing
- Counselors, therapists, and medical providers
- Faith/spiritual community

Listening Session Details

A total of 11 listening sessions were held in the Fox Valley region during the summer of 2021. Sessions were organized by groupings to ensure a variety of experiences among people in recovery and included men, women, people with less than three years of recovery, people with three or more years of recovery, people with co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders, recovery coaches, and participation in alternative recovery paths (as compared to traditional 12-step). Limitations to our findings include under representation of people who have used medication assisted treatments (e.g., Methadone, Suboxone, and Vivitrol) and people of color (98% of participants identified as White).

Listening session participants also completed a survey, which asked for details about demographics, most valuable social supports, and services that were critical to recovery.

Four themes emerged from the listening sessions:

1

People in recovery find the strongest connection and belonging within the recovery community

2

Giving back is essential to recovery

3

Stigma and lack of awareness isolates people in recovery; delays seeking help

4

People in recovery are supported by a strong and healthy broader community

1

PEOPLE IN RECOVERY FIND THE STRONGEST CONNECTION WITHIN THE RECOVERY COMMUNITY

Participants shared that their strongest relationships were among their peers in recovery more so than among family or friends who were not in recovery. These friendships were described as having unbreakable bonds, offering unconditional love, and being authentic. A deep feeling of acceptance, safety, and trust were found to promote honesty and accountability along one's personal path of recovery and across the recovery community.

Early on in recovery, relationships with counselors, medical professionals, and faith leaders were important in establishing connection to community and for healing. Participants with dual diagnosis (co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders) did not experience the same strength of relationships or connection to the recovery community as their peers. New dual diagnosis services, including group meetings and peer support, was mentioned by participants as a positive start to feeling an improved sense of belonging.

"When I first got in recovery, my social circle, my trust, my comfort zone was as wide as my shoulders. Nobody else was in there. After I went to some meetings, my comfort zone got a little bigger...it's the people in that room. As time went on, it grew to my family and then to people at work. Recovery is this process, to keep growing."



"I have this incredible circle of women in recovery who have seen me at my absolute worst and have seen me soar. I never dreamt that I would have friends like this. They are encouraging, loving, and hold me accountable. I am at my most authentic self with these ladies."

-Listening Session Participants

2

SERVING AND GIVING BACK IS ESSENTIAL TO RECOVERY

A profound takeaway from the listening sessions was the significance that was placed on service and its role in strengthening recovery and the sense of belonging. Nearly all participants shared that giving back keeps them sober and is essential to their daily recovery. Giving back was described as small acts of kindness, taking time to truly listen, being present with the people around them (including strangers), caring for family and friends, and welcoming newcomers to recovery. Service was also connected to a sense of life purpose, opportunity to build new relationships, and ways to foster accountability and belonging. Nearly all communities of recovery incorporate service through the creation of volunteer and leadership roles at meetings, through recovery activities, and in running recovery-based organizations.

"Volunteering, in the beginning, it gives you a reason to show up. I felt really socially awkward, ashamed of myself, like no one wants me around, that I'm not worth anything. Service is the beginning of forming those relationships."

"Giving back is really important for recovery. I feel like if I didn't give back to the community, I would be using again. Three years ago, you wouldn't be looking at the same person that you are today. I volunteer and do a lot in the community. I feel like I have a purpose in life."

-Listening Session Participants



3

STIGMA AND LACK OF AWARENESS ISOLATES PEOPLE IN RECOVERY AND DELAYS SEEKING HELP

Many participants stated that stigma kept them from seeking help at earlier points and that shame and judgement from others contributed to relapse, overdose, and death. Discriminating attitudes and actions that came from people in trusted positions, such as law enforcement and medical professionals who see people in their most vulnerable moments, were mentioned as especially traumatizing. Some shared that they keep their recovery from others to avoid stressful interactions and the badgering to “just have a drink and get over it.”

Participants shared that the recovery community has its own stigma to address. Stigmas include attitudes and beliefs related to different drug types (e.g., alcohol vs. illicit drugs), method of use (e.g., injection vs. pills), and mental health diagnosis (suggesting their addiction isn’t “real”).

The need to find community in safe spaces where one is not made to feel ashamed for their sobriety was said to keep participants from seeking social connection and support outside of the recovery community. Most said that they would feel supported by a community that had better awareness of the disease of addiction and knowledge of the resources and services available to connect people to the help they need.



“Stigma is killing people. The disease doesn’t define the person. The reality of stigma is what keeps taking people back out [relapse while in recovery].”

“There’s a big difference between saying things that are hard...that need to be said... and saying things that are going to harm someone. My parents never told me that I was this horrible person. They never told me that I was a piece of garbage or a failure. I believed those things; it’s what my mind told me. My parents told me that it’s going to be hard, but it’s going to be okay.”

-Listening Session Participants

4

PEOPLE IN RECOVERY ARE SUPPORTED BY A STRONG AND HEALTHY BROADER COMMUNITY

“If you get sober, go to treatment for thirty days...you are sober for thirty days. Living sober is a whole different thing. How do we work on our recovery, find a job, get an apartment all at the same time?

“A lot of women who have children will stop showing up to recovery events. I have a friend who has children, it’s hard for her to find a reliable sitter, so her recovery falls to the wayside.”

“I want everything to be recovery friendly. Every event, every job, every person. Everything in [our community] revolves around alcohol. We need more family friendly and alcohol free events.”

-Listening Session Participants

Participants said that access to community resources, especially for people new to recovery, offers a stabilizing effect, reduces life stressors, allows one to focus on recovery, and provides a safe space to establish vital social connections. Key resources include a strong housing continuum (including sober living), living wage jobs, transportation options, and access to childcare (especially for evenings and weekends). The challenge in navigating complex systems and services was mentioned by many participants. Recovery coaches and peer support specialists were named as assets to help with navigation, advocacy, and to serve as a bridge between people in recovery and the broader community.

Participants felt that the broader community could do more to get to know people in recovery and become aware of the recovery services. Attendance during community-wide events held by recovery organizations and public recognition of the positive impact recovery communities offer the broader community was suggested as a place to start. People in recovery also recognized a need for more alcohol-free activities and events in the broader community.

"I wish more people knew about our recovery community here, they would value and have appreciation for our community of recovery. I have only experienced the community here in [the Fox Valley area] and I don't want to go anywhere else. I have heard from those that leave and come back, it's just so profound here."

- Listening Session Participant



HOW THE RECOVERY COMMUNITY CAN BUILD ON ITS SUPPORT, CONNECTION, AND SENSE OF BELONGING:

The recovery community is a vital asset to people in recovery. Lessons learned from participants can inform how spaces of connection and belonging can be equipped across the broader community. All participants shared a deep appreciation for the recovery community here in the greater Fox Valley region. Relationships and a sense of belonging are established through recovery services and the genuine community that has been built. Participants shared ways the recovery community can build on its strong foundation:

1. Expand and strengthen recovery outreach:

- Increase hours of operation for drop-in support at recovery centers and clubs, especially in the evenings, weekends, and during holidays.
- Offer more community events and activities to help strengthen connection and relationships, especially in the winter months.
- Build a more inclusive environment and conduct outreach to welcome people of color and people who identify as LGBTQ+ within the recovery community.
- Partner with groups and organizations in the broader community to hold more alcohol-free and family-friendly community events and activities.

2. Address the stigma within the recovery community:

Improve support for and acceptance of people who have co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders,

for people who use medication assisted treatments, and for people who seek alternative recovery paths beyond traditional 12-step programs.

3. Increase access to transitional and sober living housing options:

Reduce wait times and improve the affordability of sober housing options. Many participants shared the critical role that sober living played following treatment services in stabilizing their recovery and initiating healthy relationships.

4. Offer navigation assistance for people in recovery:

Help people better access stabilizing resources and services in the community (e.g., housing, living wage jobs, childcare, medical services), substance use counseling and aftercare services, and mental health services. Consider the use of recovery coaches and peer support specialists to help with connection to community services.



"A whole new generation is coming up. If we educate the younger people on what to look out for in your friends, in their family, and even in themselves, we could help make things better."

- Listening Session Participant

HOW OUR BROADER COMMUNITY CAN SUPPORT PEOPLE IN RECOVERY:

The greater Fox Valley region is supported by many organizations and services that have benefited our whole community, including people in recovery. Participants shared the challenge of living in a community that does not embrace recovery and barriers faced when attempting to access needed services. Suggestions to improve support include:

1. Learn about addiction and recovery, be supportive, and help connect to resources

- Take time to learn about the disease of addiction
- Stop the stigma around substance use and toward people in recovery
- Be aware of treatment and recovery services; help connect people to care
- Get to know the recovery community; offer more substance free community events and activities
- Support friends and family of people in recovery so they can in turn be strong for their loved ones

2. Assist people in recovery with navigation of services and resources

- Help people in recovery navigate systems and resources; position staffed and trained navigation specialists in our community
- Increase access to licensed clinical social workers (LCSW) who can conduct substance use assessments which reduces delays into treatment services
- Utilize recovery coaches and peer support specialists to connect people into treatment and recovery services and serve as a knowledgeable bridge to community resources

3. Strengthen basic needs and community supports

- Increase sober living options; strengthen the housing continuum by addressing gaps in homeless sheltering, transitional living, and affordable housing
- Offer affordable childcare during evenings and weekends to support parents in recovery, especially women
- Improve living wage employment options with opportunities to advance; help people with conviction histories access good paying jobs
- Increase funding and support for area recovery organizations, programs, and services

4. Improve access to treatment services

- Ensure treatment services match individuals' needs ; insurance companies require failure at lower levels of treatment before offering treatment services that are needed
- Reduce the time it takes to get into treatment services; address waitlists to receive care
- Increase support and services for people with dual diagnosis mental health and substance use disorders
- Utilize peer support and recover coaches as a bridge to refer people to services and to identify gaps in services

"We need someone to help us navigate the systems and services. Ways to get housing, ways to get food, and good jobs. Sobriety from drinking and drugs are part of recovery. There are many life factors that we need help with as we move forward."

- Listening Session Participant

How you can help and support people in recovery:

- Help build a culture of support, connection and belonging in our community
- Learn about addiction and recovery, be supportive, and help connect people to resources
- Assist people in recovery with navigation of services and resources
- Strengthen basic needs and community supports
- Improve access to treatment services



STRONG
RELATIONSHIPS



SENSE OF
BELONGING



MEANINGFUL
CONTRIBUTION

*"The recovery community has found a piece of the solution: connectedness and the support that everybody needs. And what it ends up being is called **unconditional love**. That's the kind of support that we need to get the [broader] community to share."*

- Listening Session Participant



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