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Recovery is Contagious

William L. White

Emeritus Senior Research Consultant
Chestnut Health Systems
bwhite@chestnut.org

Many of us in this room know that addiction is contagious. Addiction was not a purpose we set out to achieve. We grew up in a world that castigated people with drug problems as *dope fiends*, *crack heads*, *drunks*, *winos*, and worse. None of us wrote an essay in 5th grade saying we wanted to be an *addict* when we grew up. One day in our lives, we chose to pick up, but we didn't choose what followed. None of us wanted to so wound ourselves and those we love. We tried but could not prevent that harm from happening. Our addiction was not a choice; it was something we got caught up in and lost control over. Addiction is a disease of exposure—a collision between personal vulnerability and social opportunity. And that opportunity is often bred within psychological and social circumstances that made picking up again and again an attractive choice.

As a culture, we have recognized this process of social contagion. We have long referred to surges in alcohol and other drug problems as *epidemics*—a term most often applied to communicable diseases. But I am not here tonight to talk about disease. I am

here to talk about recovery—something we rarely think of in terms of contagion. We usually think of recovery as something that arises from deep inside someone. We think of it as those rare transformative experiences like Bill Wilson experienced in a hospital room and Malcolm X experienced in a jail cell, or we think of it as a slow process of internal change—a process of spiritual awakening.

Folk wisdom says recovery comes only when we hit our own personal bottom. But recovery did not come to some of you in this room by hitting bottom. Some of you lived on the bottom, and recovery remained a stranger. Some of you were drowning in pain, had lost everything but your life to addiction—and recovery still did not come. When it finally arrived, it wasn't forced on you and you didn't initially choose it. You caught recovery in spite of yourself. And you caught it from other people in recovery—from people here at NET and from people in the recovery fellowships meeting every day throughout this city.

Let me be clear and brutally honest. Some of you did not come to NET seeking recovery. Many of you had never even seen long-term recovery in the flesh—had no idea what it even looked like. Many of you came to treatment not because of the monkey on your back, but the people on your butt. Some of you came looking not for recovery but respite—a break from the life, not an end to it. Some of you came to escape the threat of jail. Some of you came to keep or get back important people in your life. The reasons were many and may have changed every day, but recovery was not at the top of that list. And yet many of you have started what will be a lifelong recovery journey. So how did this miracle happen?

My message tonight is a simple one: Recovery is contagious. That message is the centerpiece of the recovery revolution sparked by the leadership Dr. Arthur Evans, Jr. brought to the City of Philadelphia more than five years ago. That message is what has made NET one of the leading treatment centers in the country. And there is no better example of this process than what is happening right here, right now. This night is a celebration of the contagiousness of recovery and the fulfilled promises recovery has brought into our lives. Some of you did not leave the streets to find recovery; recovery came to the streets and found you. And it did so through volunteers of the NET Consumer Council walking those streets. They put a face and voice on recovery. They told you that recovery was possible, and they offered their stories as living proof of that proposition. They told you they would walk the road to recovery with you. Some of you hit low points in the early days of that journey, and it was your brothers and sisters in this room that lifted you back up—who called when you missed group, who, in some

cases, went and got you. Many of you were buried deep within a culture of addiction—a way of thinking, feeling, acting, and relating as powerful as the drugs you were taking. The NET community and the larger recovery community of Philadelphia helped you escape and welcomed you into membership in another world—a culture of recovery. And this moment we are sharing together tonight stands as witness to the vitality of that recovery culture.

Recovery is contagious only through interpersonal connection—only in the context of community. For those still in the life to find hope and recovery, they must take the unlikely risk of leaving their cocooned world or we must risk going to get them. The outreach work of the NET Consumer Council has a poignant message for this country's efforts to prevent and treat addiction. If we are really serious about addiction, then we should reach those who are at early stages of their addiction careers and not wait until decades of devastation finally bring them to the doors of a treatment center. We need to correct the community conditions in which addiction flourishes. We need to protect those most vulnerable to addiction. We need assertive intervention programs that shorten addiction careers and extend recovery careers. To achieve those goals, we must carry resilience and recovery into the very heart of local drug cultures. We must make the transformative potential of recovery visible to those who need it the most.

The contagion of addiction is transmitted through a process of infection—the movement of addiction disease from one vulnerable person to another. The contagion of recovery is spread quite differently—not

through infection, but affection.¹ Those who spread such affection are *recovery carriers*. Recovery carriers—because of the nature of their character and the quality of their lives—exert a magnetic attraction to those who are still suffering. Recovery carriers affirm that long-term recovery is possible and that the promises of recovery are far more than the removal of drugs from an otherwise unchanged life. They tell us that we have the potential to get well and to then get better than well. They challenge us to stop being everyone’s problem and to become part of the solution. They relate to us from a position of profound empathy, emotional authenticity, respect and moral equality—lacking even a whisper of contempt. Most importantly, they offer us love. Yeah, some of us got loved into recovery, and I don’t mean in the way some of you with smiles on your faces may be thinking. The affection at the heart of the recovery community you have created here at NET is being extended as a force for building resistance, resilience, and recovery within the larger Philadelphia community and beyond.

We all have the potential to be recovery carriers. Becoming a recovery

carrier requires several things. It requires that we protect our recoveries at all cost—*Recovery by any means necessary under any circumstances*. It requires that we help our families recover. It requires the courage to reach out to those whose lives are being ravaged. It requires that we give back to NET and other organizations that helped us along the way. And it requires that in our new life, we try to heal the wounds we inflicted on our community in our past life.

Addiction is visible everywhere in this culture, but the transformative power of recovery is hidden behind closed doors. It is time we all became recovery carriers. It is time we helped our community, our nation, and our world recover. To achieve this, we must become recovery. We must be the face and voice of recovery. We must be the living future of recovery.

So to all who are here tonight—individuals and families in recovery and allies of recovery, I leave you with this message. **Recovery is contagious. Get close to it. Stay close to it. Catch it. Keep catching it. Pass it on.**

¹ I wish to acknowledge Kathy Griffin, who was present at the NET dinner and first brought this distinction to my attention.