



A guide to recovery from addiction and what helps

For helping professionals

The Serenity Café aims to provide a hub in Edinburgh for the recovery community, building social networks, creating personal development opportunities and supporting collective action for people recovering from addiction to drugs and alcohol, helping to strengthen long term recovery and enabling people to regain a positive and fulfilled life. The Serenity Café was established in 2009 in Edinburgh by people recovering from addiction, with the support of community development agency Comas. In 2010 the Serenity Café won the Community Action Award of the SCVO Scottish Charity Awards. The Serenity Café uses an action research approach helping people in recovery to share their experiences and expertise. This paper is one of a series exploring different aspects of recovery.

"I love my recovery, I love my life now"

"Getting my kids back in my life, experiencing peace in my head for the first time without the need to drug myself to get it"

"I love my recovery. If I could extend further into the horizon my peace of mind, knowing it was going to be there in a year, it would really help"

"I found it much harder to stay off alcohol, because it is everywhere you go. With my other addiction I could stay away from dealers".

This guide to recovery is based on the experience of people involved in the Serenity Café

What is recovery?

People involved in the Serenity Café are all people recovering from addiction to alcohol and/or drugs. They include men and women aged from early 20s to 60s, whose active addiction sometimes spanned decades. Many people were addicted to both alcohol and drugs. Some people prefer to identify as an alcoholic, and some prefer to identify as an addict, and some identify as alcoholic/addicts. However, within the Serenity Café people share a desire to focus on *recovery and the shared experience of recovering*, not on the substance they were addicted to.

People in the Serenity Café have chosen abstinence from all substances as the best way to manage their addiction. People who experienced an addiction to drugs have recognised that alcohol influences decision making and often acts as the gateway to relapse, so have decided to be abstinent from alcohol too. People who were addicted to alcohol also recognise that their addiction to an alcohol-induced altered physical and mental state could also lead to a potential addiction to other substances, and so avoid drugs too.

Recovery is a Journey

People in the Serenity Café believe that recovery is a journey:

- **The very start of this journey is a realisation that recovery – a life free from drugs or alcohol – is possible.**

Many people who are addicted have come to live their lives in environments which support their addiction, with others who are addicted. People in the Serenity Café believe that the availability of living examples of people who have made the journey from addiction to abstinence are important to people living in addiction, so that they can realise that recovery is possible. Importantly, many people in the Serenity Café started their recovery journey because they met professionals who also believe recovery is possible.

- **The journey also starts with a desire for a better, healthier life**

Some people involved in the Serenity Café started their recovery journey by being prescribed methadone, and recognise that this gave them a period of stability and regular contact with services which helped them with different aspects of their lives. However, many people who used prescriptions were not told that they could gradually become drug free. People in the Serenity Café feel that the journey to recovery makes progress if services openly discuss abstinence as a goal people can choose, and can achieve with support.

People learned from professionals who were frank and open about the health risks of continuing to use substances, who were willing to challenge people when they were denying or struggling to recognise their addiction, but who were also willing to stick with them while they came to that point of recognition and started to want to recover.

- **The journey does not stop on exit from treatment services**

Most treatment services are short term programmes helping people to detox and learn some of the skills needed to stay abstinent. However, after years of addiction, many people have a wide range of issues to address when rebuilding their lives. Remaining abstinent can be hard work for a long time, and risk of relapse is high, gradually reducing over years of staying drink or drug free. This is why the Serenity Café was established – to help people find the support they need from others with a similar experience.

“I thought my life was over when I had to put down substances. I thought I can’t do this or do that, can’t go to a nightclub. An aspect of that is true because of the nature of my recovery. But Serenity Cafe gives you something”

“Relocating from WC when out of treatment was the best possible thing. It was important to get away from the area where people were still using”.

“Recovery didn’t happen in treatment, it happened when I started finding my place in life”.

Why the bigger picture is important

Most people involved in the Serenity Cafe have experienced recovery from addiction as a major life transition. During addiction, many people’s lives have become entirely focused on their substance, damaging their families and relationships, education and employment; sometimes forcing people into lifestyles that required them to live against their own values, damaging their sense of identity and self esteem. Their daily routine, their social networks and their means of living were enmeshed with their addiction.

In research on recovery, ‘*recovery capital*’ is the term used to describe a range of positive aspects which help them to build fulfilled, healthy lives and to avoid relapse. Many people involved in the Serenity Cafe feel that treatment for addiction tends to focus on eliminating the substance from people’s lives, rather than creating the recovery capital people need to ensure that ongoing abstinence is possible.

Who or what helps build recovery capital?

People involved in the Serenity Cafe have identified a range of features important to their positive approach to recovery. **These could be supported and provided for by a wide range of services in health, education, welfare, community and employability services.** They do not need to be the exclusive domain of drugs services or related services. However, people in recovery do appreciate services which understand that early recovery can be challenging, and that there are times when people in recovery need to ‘put their recovery first’ and gain strength from others in recovery.

The range of helpful services people in the Serenity Cafe have identified fall into recognisable categories:

- **Basic needs**

Housing can be a vital service to people in recovery. City of Edinburgh’s Randolph Crescent Supported Housing Service has been successful for many people involved in the Serenity Cafe by providing relocation away from the community where they were known as addicts and enabling a move to a permanent tenancy as quickly as possible, to help put down roots for recovery. However, ensuring affordable rents in private tenancies, to avoid a potential ‘benefit trap’ when considering employment or education, has been a key issue for people.

Welfare advice has also been essential to reduce the stress of negotiating the welfare maze and ensuring appropriate benefits, such as Disability Living Allowance for people with poor health or other conditions.

- **Structure and meaningful activities**

People involved in the Serenity Cafe found that in early recovery, establishing a routine and positive structure throughout the week, including evenings and weekends, was essential to their wellbeing and sustained abstinence. Activities most commonly used by people included learning opportunities, volunteering and attending mutual aid groups (e.g. AA).

A key feature of recovery-friendly services is flexibility – people leaving treatment services find it difficult to wait for a ‘new term’ to start or to be put on a waiting list. Providers such as Access to Industry’s Transition Project that can offer flexible start dates and flexible timetabling have been found to be very useful by people involved in the Serenity Cafe.

- **Opportunities for self actualisation**

In recovery, many people experience a long process of coming to terms with the damage their addiction caused to themselves and others. Often, people used substances to help them cope with very difficult experiences in their lives; in recovery these can re-surface and cause more emotional turmoil. Many people in the Serenity Cafe have identified the need for accessible counselling and long term support to deal with past trauma, in order to complete the healing process in their recovery from addiction.

People involved in the Serenity Cafe have also found a need to restore a sense of their positive identity in recovery, to help build their self esteem. Many gain this through being involved in mutual aid or self help groups in which sharing experience is a way of ‘giving and getting back’. Volunteering opportunities offer another opportunity to give, which ultimately benefits the giver by helping them regain a sense of being part of a community.

Some challenges

People’s physical and mental health can be fragile in early recovery. Common issues in the Serenity Cafe development have included poor memory, poor time management, taking on too much too soon, then dropping out when things get too much. Women in recovery are in the minority and have limited opportunities to get together in women-only settings. Parenting and family life can take time to adapt to life in recovery after years of addiction – other family members may take a long time to believe in a person’s recovery.

What helps

Treatment Services

Research shows that people can overcome addiction without treatment or rehabilitation. However, the majority of people involved in the Serenity Cafe have experienced treatment for their addiction and feel this represented the major turning point in their lives.

Many people found their way to treatment services by meeting a professional who was prepared to discuss their addiction with them honestly and make referrals for treatment at the right time. Some people in the Serenity Cafe have commented that they used services for many years before they heard of treatment services which might help them achieve abstinence, or of mutual aid groups which support abstinence (such as AA, NA and CA, see below). It seems that people who were alcoholics had many different routes through services and found their way into treatment more by chance. Although many accessed detox services as “repeat customers”, they found it harder to access rehabilitation/treatment services, whilst people who were addicted to drugs had a more common pathway through drugs agencies and into rehab/treatment.

Recovery-Oriented Integrated Systems

Recovery-oriented integrated systems of care is a concept being developed in the US, where planning and service design, as well as service delivery, is carried out in ways which draw services together to achieve a holistic approach to recovery. The principle of integrated systems is that services which build bridges for people into appropriate services when they are ready, and then into wider networks of support, are more effective in supporting recovery journeys and helping people to avoid relapse. In Edinburgh, integration is beginning to take place informally.

The Serenity Cafe has benefited enormously from strong links with LEAP, the Lothian and Edinburgh Abstinence Project (a treatment centre), City of Edinburgh’s Randolph Crescent housing service, and Access to Industry’s Transition Project. The links between these services ensure that a holistic approach to support is achieved, and that recovery capital is developed. These services take place within a wider recovery community created by mutual aid groups and other approaches to helping people recover.

The Serenity Cafe vision – why and how

The Serenity Cafe was established because people in recovery realised that most services focus on certain aspects of people’s lives, such as treatment, housing, employment and further education. In recovery, coping with the massive changes in life can lead to social isolation, fear of relapse, and having to cope with many new situations without the crutch of substances. People in recovery wanted a social network in which they could support each other and enjoy their recovery, during social hours – that is, beyond the 9-5, Monday to Friday hours in which most services work. They also wanted to respond to a specific fear of many people in early recovery that they would not be able to participate in a ‘normal’ social life in today’s adult social scene where alcohol and drugs dominate venues. The Serenity Cafe has grown as a network of cafe-club nights, activity groups and peer support led by people in recovery for people in recovery. People in recovery are being supported to develop community development skills to lead the initiative.

The recovery community

The ‘recovery community’ has developed in Edinburgh over many years, mainly through mutual aid groups, creating a network of people who share their experience and reach out to help others. The confidential nature of recovery from addiction has meant that until recently, this network was largely hidden from the view of professionals. However, if we want to reduce the stigma of addiction we need to increase public awareness that recovery is possible and that there is a recovery community in Edinburgh which can support people.

Through initiatives like the Serenity Cafe and LEAP, people in recovery are gradually making recovery more visible, both to celebrate recovery and to promote ways of working which support recovery. People from the recovery community are now participating in policy making and decision making in order to ensure services reflect the needs of people in recovery, and maximise positive outcomes.

“Gaining hope opened the door, hearing what other people had been through and seeing them integrate into society and able to laugh”

“Serenity Cafe is the opportunity to get rid of that “I’m never going to meet anyone again”.

“The Serenity Cafe is a great place to learn about relationships. I need things in my life, my life isn’t sorted, I need more than work in my life. It’s good for me to be about people who are healthy in recovery”.

“The deciding factor was [AA] meetings – other people in recovery”.

“Services need to see that drink and drug problems co-exist in many people and need to be treated together”

Mutual Aid Groups - facts and myths

The Serenity Cafe does not promote any particular journey to recovery or means of sustaining abstinence. Recovery is an individual journey and people must do whatever works for them. However, the sayings '*if it isn't working, do something different*' and '*you don't know until you've tried it*' are also important things for people to bear in mind.

The network of meetings

Many professionals are unaware that mutual aid groups – Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, and Al-Anon for families of addicts, have existed throughout Scotland for many years, supported by an international network, and associated support such as websites and helplines. In Edinburgh and the Lothians there are meetings at all times of day throughout the area for AA and NA, and the number of meetings is growing all the time. People can attend all three groups: AA, NA and CA if they wish, although many people identify with one of these. Some people find that these different mutual aid groups have slightly different characters and choose according to their preference; many also find they prefer a particular meeting, making one their 'home group'. Locations and times are advertised on the national websites. We estimate there are at least 2,500 people involved in this area. If people attend one meeting and don't like it or feel comfortable, there is plenty of choice and people of all ages, from diverse backgrounds, attend.

Who can attend

Anyone with a desire to stop using substances can attend a mutual aid group. They do not need to be referred, but they can ask, via a helpline, for a group member to meet them and accompany them to a meeting. All meetings are free and open to addicts (people contribute if they can to the cost of meeting rooms), but some 'open' meetings may be attended by professionals (or family or friends) who can accompany someone if they wish, or simply attend by themselves to find out how meetings work.

What happens at meetings

At meetings, people commit to respecting others' confidentiality, and share their experiences and hope with others. This sharing helps people to learn from others and to 'offload' their own challenges and dilemmas (and joys) safely in a respectful and safe environment. There is no requirement to speak at all. An experienced member of the group will 'open' and the group decides who will 'chair' the meeting. There are strong traditions which prevent any individual or group from profiting from the groups, receiving external funding or getting involved in political debates. The groups are not allowed to 'affiliate' to, advertise or promote, any other external groups or associations or to advertise or promote these.

The 12 steps and the spiritual aspect

Mutual aid groups follow what is known as "the 12 steps". This was developed by the personal trial and error of founding members of AA in the early 20th century. It has since been adopted by many treatment centres worldwide, and adapted to address many other addictive disorders. When the language of the 12 step programme is unpicked, many people would recognise some well recognised steps towards personal development that resonate with many other self-help approaches. However, one of the stumbling blocks for many professionals is the emphasis on acceptance of a 'higher power'. Many people in our society do not adopt a religion or specific faith and feel the suggestion of a 'higher power' is a religious perspective. This is not the intention of AA/NA. Many people, of a specific faith *and no faith*, do benefit from the 12 step approach and take different personal approaches to 'working the steps' that suit their own belief system.

Sponsorship and reciprocity

We have found in the Serenity Cafe that mutual aid groups are an enormous help for many people to sustain abstinence, in particular the tradition of having a 'sponsor' – someone with experience of recovery – to help learn more about self management of their recovery. The core purpose of mutual aid groups is to involve people in recovery in helping and learning from each other's experience. Research has shown that the process of helping others in this way provides as much benefit for the giver as the person receiving support.

Useful reading and resources

- Wired in – online resource for people in recovery and professionals www.wiredin.org.uk
- www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk
- www.narcotics-anonymous.org.uk
- Recovery resources and experience from the US - www.facesandvoicesofrecovery.org
- The Recovery Academy – building and mapping the evidence for recovery www.recoveryacademy.org