



Recovery as a Social Process: Evolving Networks, Shifting Identities, and the Role of Community

Emily A. Hennessy, PhD

Associate Director, Recovery Research Institute

Director of Biostatistics, Recovery Research Institute

Associate Director, National Center on Youth Prevention, Treatment, & Recovery

Center for Addiction Medicine

Massachusetts General Hospital

Assistant Professor, Harvard Medical School

May, 2026



Acknowledgements

Some of the research presented is supported by funding from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (K01 AA028536). The content is solely the responsibility of the author and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health.



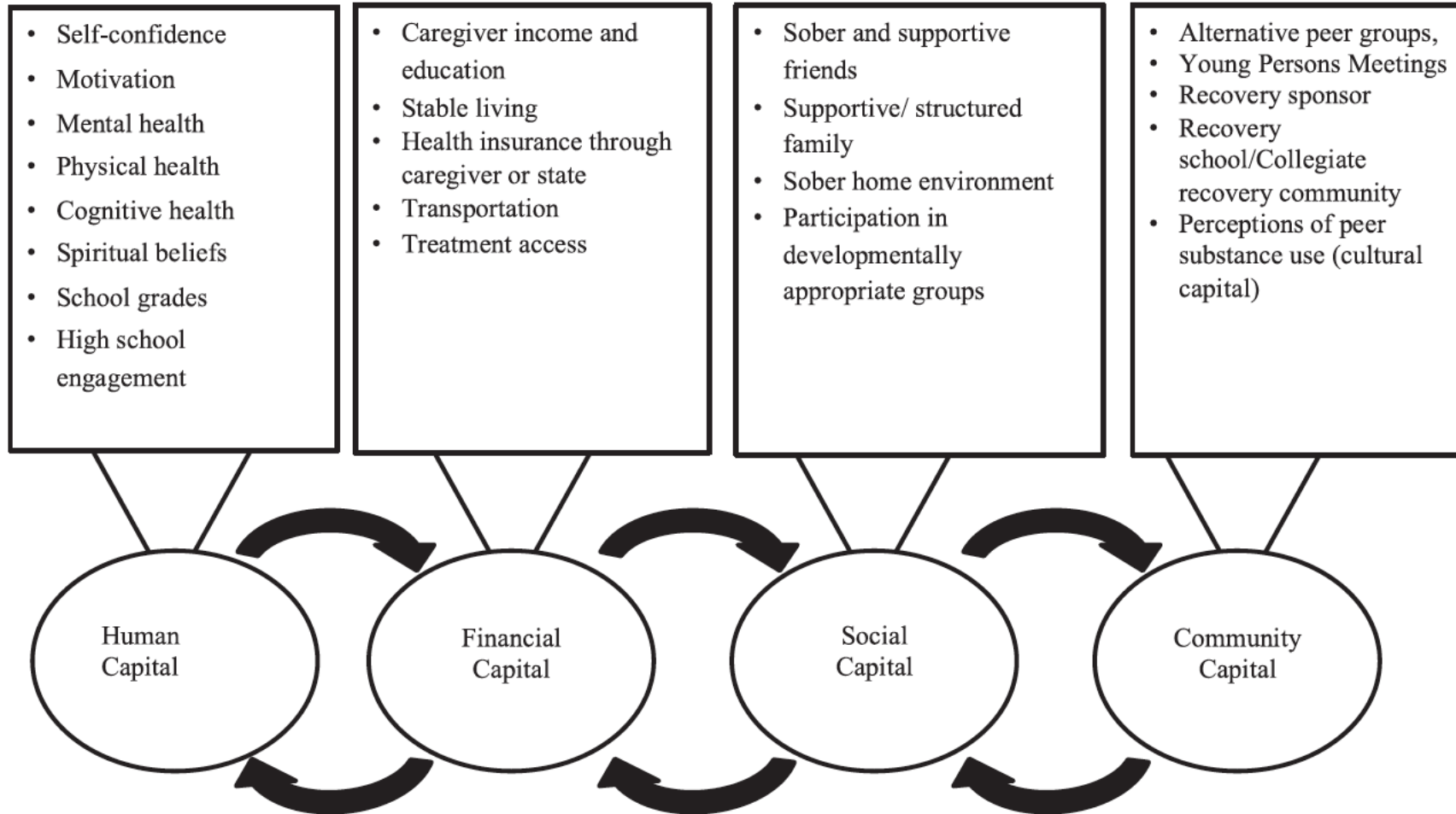
Defining Addiction Recovery

Recovery is “a process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential.”

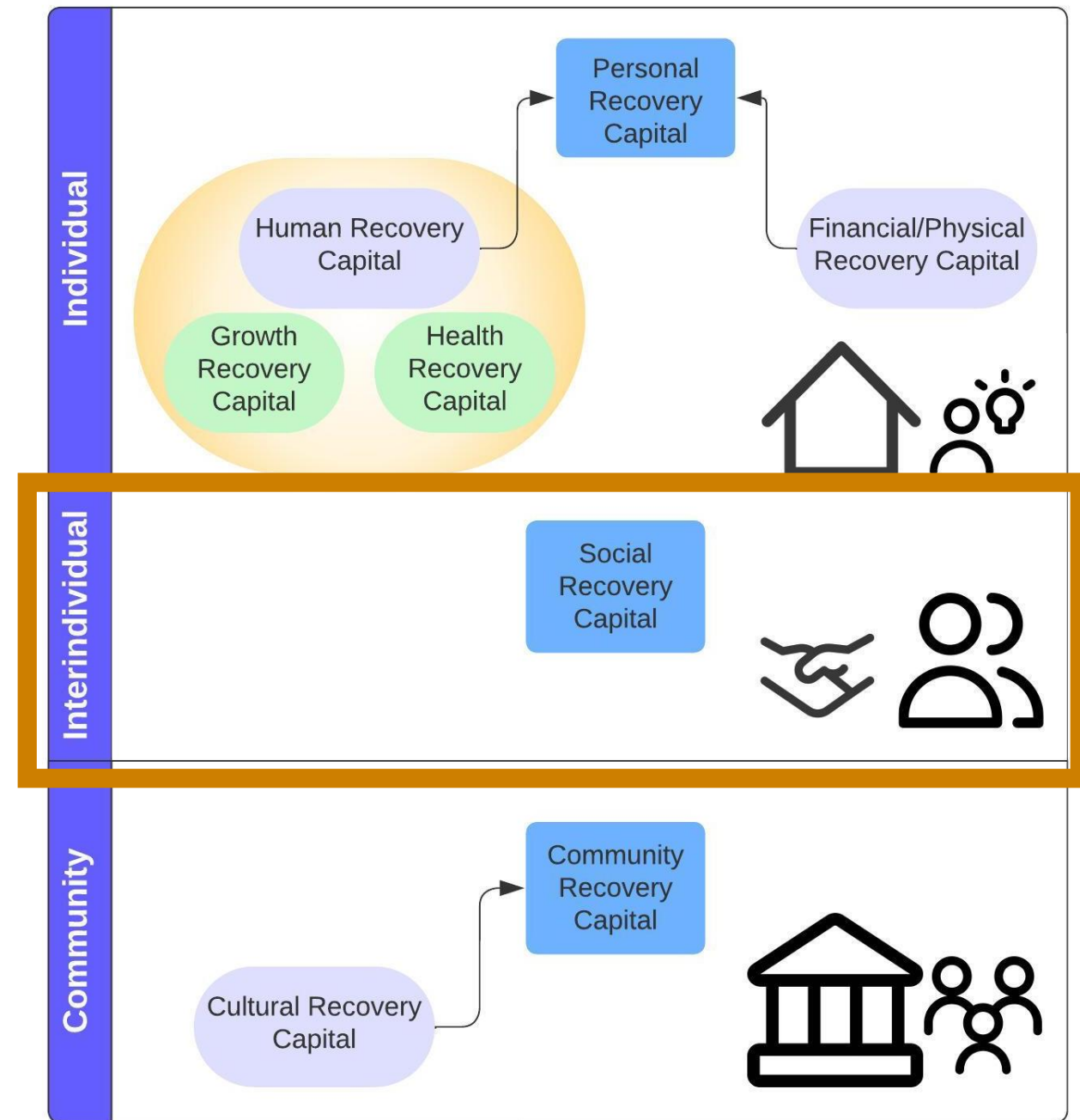
- ***Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration***



Recovery Capital



Recovery Capital: A dynamic ecological model



Evidence on recovery social influences

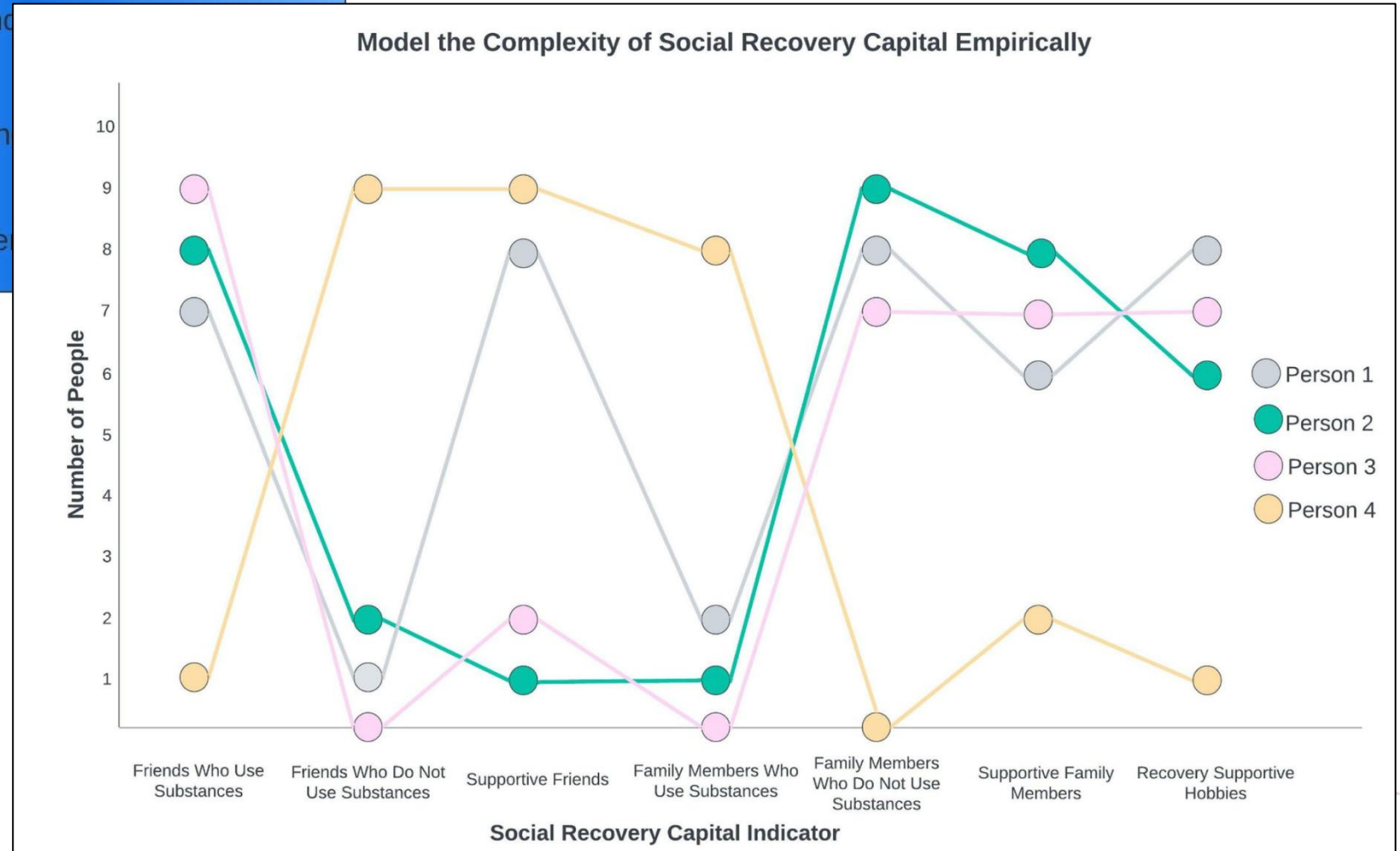
	SUPPORT	BARRIER
PEERS	Youth with more social support and friends actively supporting recovery efforts → more likely to be abstinent	Use among peers is strong predictor of relapse
FAMILIES	Structure, i.e., use of “cutoffs” or issuing ultimatums around substance use; Engage in family system treatment; Learning new parenting practices and skills	Noticeable substance use; Strained relationships; Poor communication
RECOVERY ROLE MODELS	Model recovery behaviors; Understand the nature of addiction; Support the youth in their recovery process; Connection to larger recovery community	Lack of access in some communities; negative stigma around recovery culture



Degrees of social support, risks, influence...

Friends encourage use
Friends actively using
Friends use on occasion

Friends
Friends
Sobriety



Theory on Social Influence & Change



Social Categorization and Comparison

Divide social world into categories

You either belong to a group *or* you see another group as “other”

People seek a positive social identity – act in ways the group approves

A positive social identity can serve basic developmental needs, certainty, self-esteem, and meaning



I am who I am – we are who we are

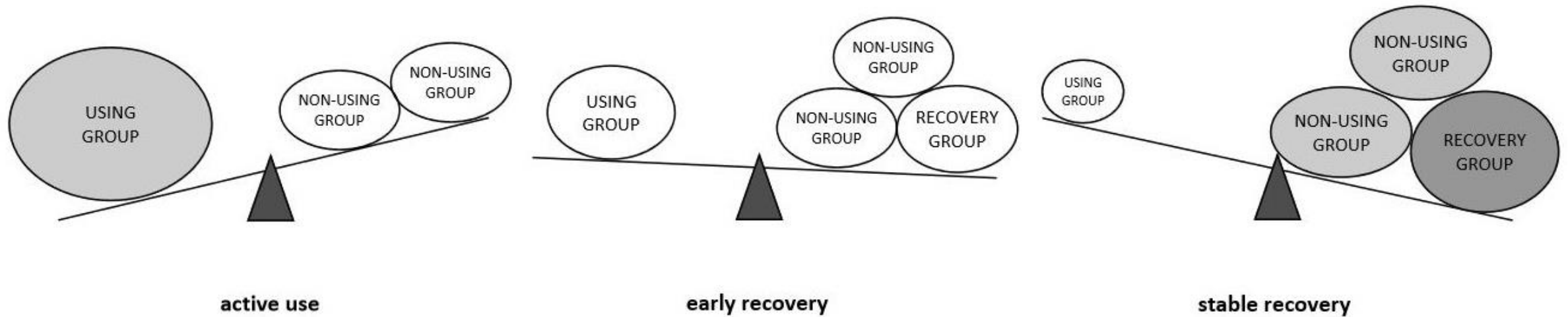


Experimenting with different social identities

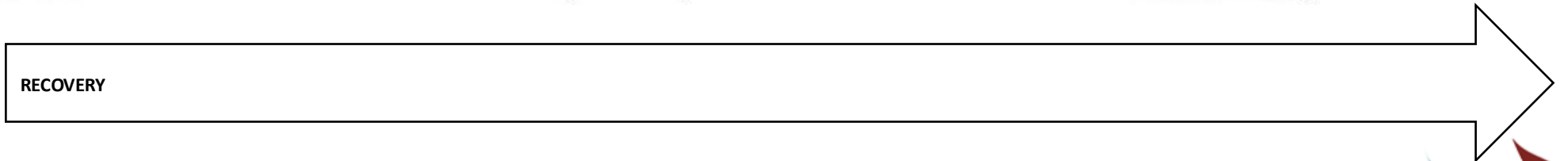


Social Network Transition

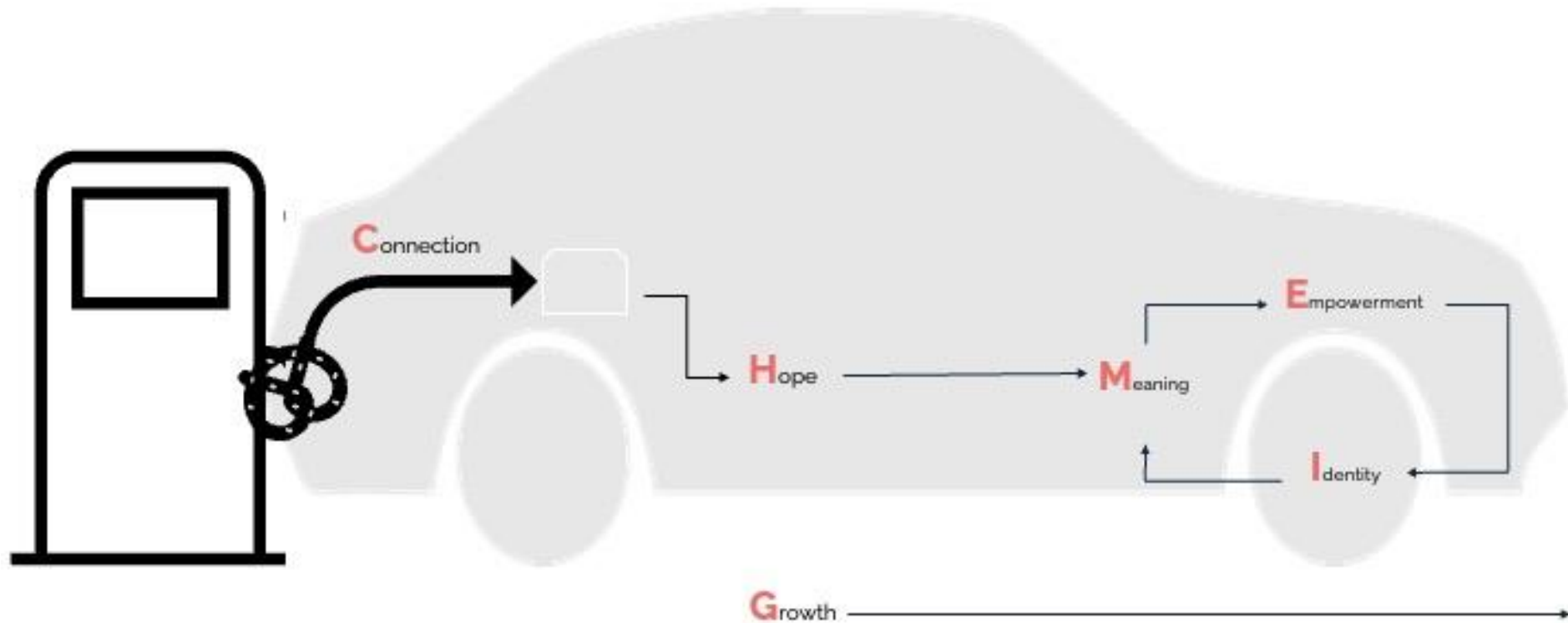
RECOVERY CAPITAL $+++$ \longleftrightarrow $---$ BARRIERS TO RECOVERY



RECOVERY



G-CHIME: Engine of Recovery



Examining G-CHIME in a Recovery Program Context


ADDICTION RESEARCH & THEORY
<https://doi.org/10.1080/16066359.2025.2517636>



RESEARCH ARTICLE



G-CHIME framework to examine adolescent addiction recovery in alternative peer groups: a qualitative analysis

Emily A. Hennessy^a , Alana Johnston^{a,c}, Angela Nash^b, and Brandon G. Bergman^a

^aRecovery Research Institute, Center for Addiction Medicine, Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts, USA; ^bCizik School of Nursing, University of Texas Health Science Center, Houston, Texas, USA; ^cDepartment of Psychological Sciences, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas, USA

ABSTRACT

Background: Research examining mechanisms that underlie adolescent addiction recovery can help inform best practices for this at-risk group. Alternative Peer Groups (APGs) are recovery supports intending to facilitate positive peer connections and prosocial activities. Consistent with the G-CHIME framework (Ogilvie and Carson 2022), theory suggests APGs enhance adolescent recovery through Connectedness with APG peers and leaders, leading to Growth, Hope, Identity, Meaning, and Empowerment. In this study, we conducted qualitative analyses using the G-CHIME framework to examine recovery processes among APG participants.

Methods: This was a secondary analysis of interviews with former APG participants ($n = 14$; 71% male; $M_{age} = 20.4$) and with leaders of those APGs ($n = 7$). G-CHIME elements were used as preliminary codes and sub-codes were generated during transcript review, including the addition of Motivation. Transcripts were analyzed using the constant comparative method.

ARTICLE HISTORY

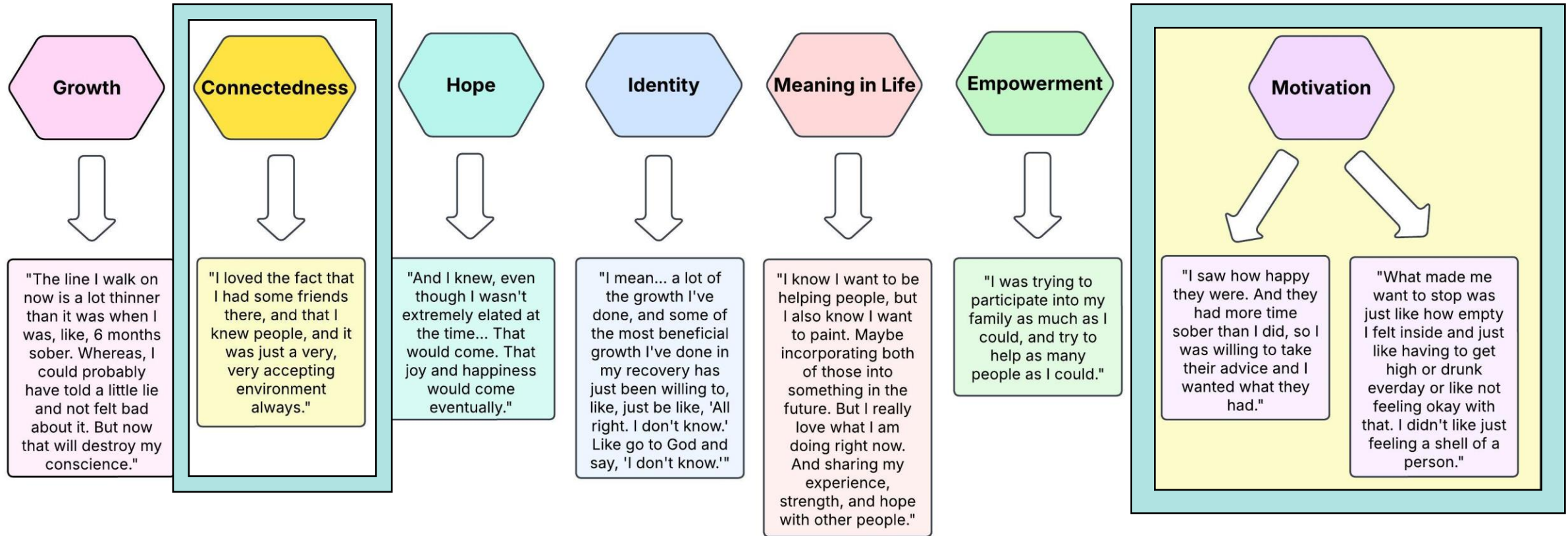
Received 9 October 2024
Revised 2 June 2025
Accepted 5 June 2025

KEYWORDS

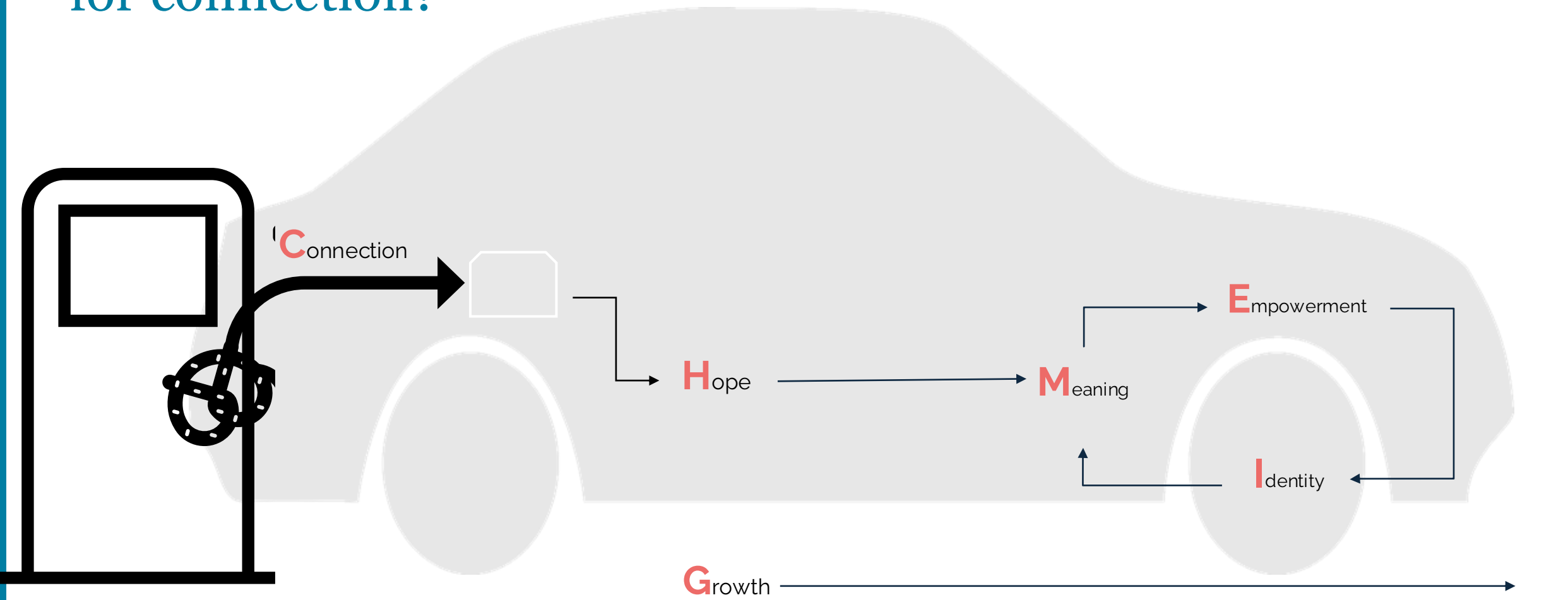
Adolescence; alternative peer groups; G-CHIME; recovery capital



G-CHIME+Motivation



G-CHIME: What happens in the absence of opportunities for connection?



Highly stigmatized condition

People need to realize, like, it's more than just someone choosing to do the drugs at first... it's like a bad nightmare that just keeps going on every day.



Stigma

An individual or group is considered to have a **devalued trait** that can lead to **being negatively judged, left out, or other negative consequences**



Perceive



Enact

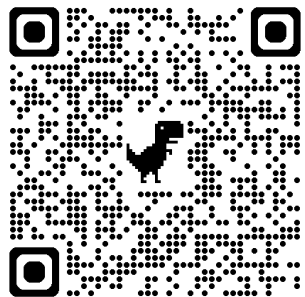


Internalize

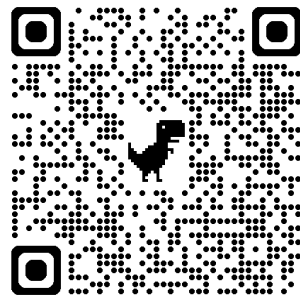


Programs to reduce stigma *and* support recovery through social influence

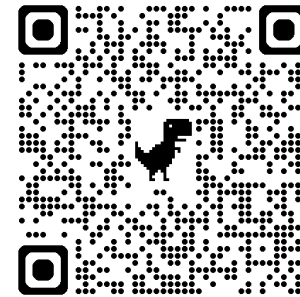
- Mutual Help Organizations (AA, NA, SMART Recovery, Recovery Dharma)
- Recovery High Schools
- Collegiate Recovery Programs
- Alternative Peer Groups (youth-specific)
- Recovery Cafes
- Sober Homes and Therapeutic Communities



Recovery Community
Centers/Organizations
(Peer Recovery
Coaching)



Recovery
Residences



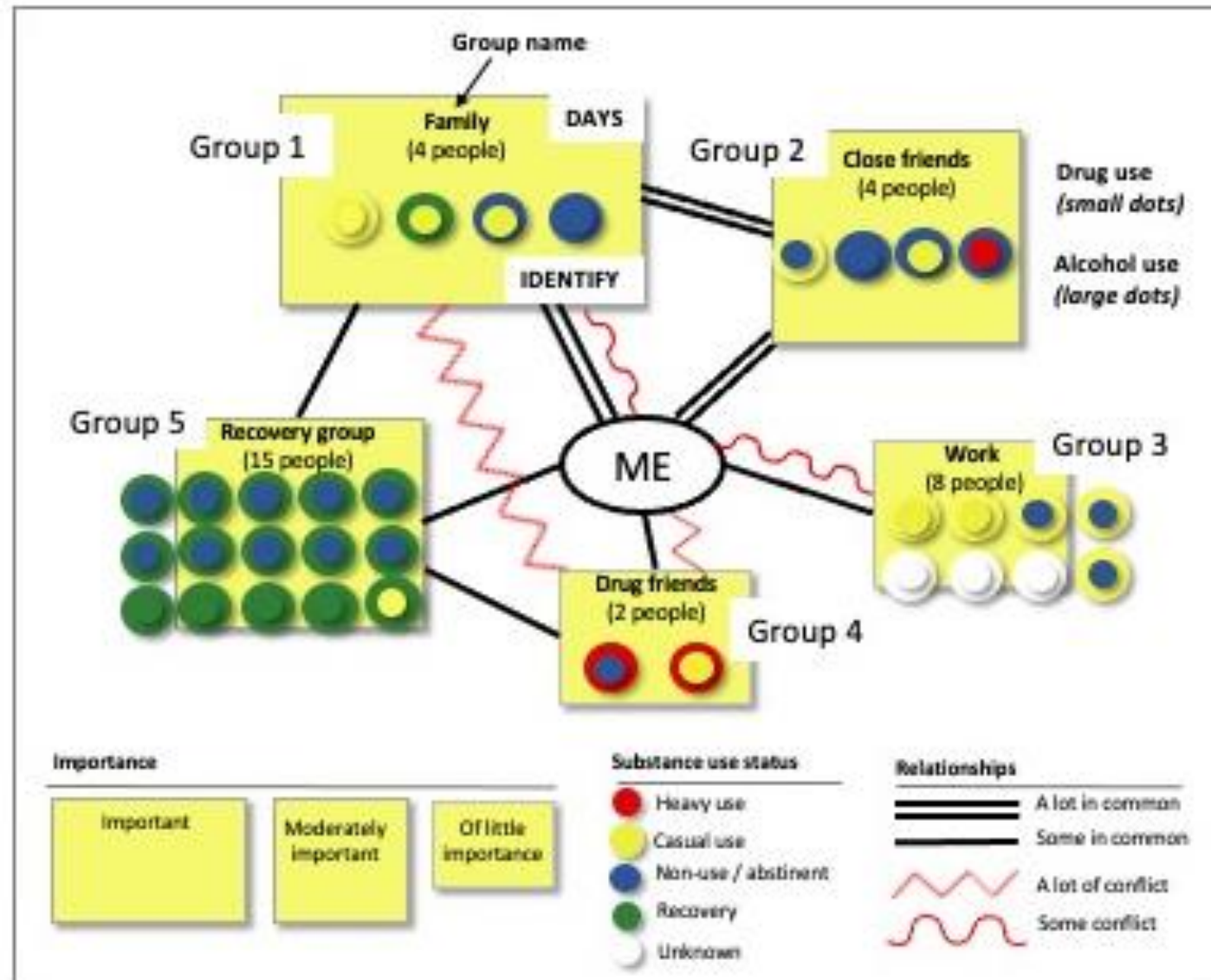
Educational Recovery
Programs



Measuring & Examining Social Influence



Social Identity Map



Two Empirical Studies

Study 1 (n = 28)

- 12-19 years old
- In treatment; seeking treatment; in a recovery support service group
- Single study visit, includes SIM, interview, and survey
- In person and remote study visits

Study 2 (n = 200)

- 12-19 years old
- Entering inpatient treatment
- 4 study visits; 1 at entry to treatment, discharge, then 3, 6, and 12 months after discharge
- Structured clinical interview, online SIM, self-report survey, qualitative interviews (subset of 30)
- In person baseline and discharge; remote follow-ups





Submit an article

Journal homepage

Enter keywords, authors, DOI, etc

55

Views

0

CrossRef citations to date

6

Altmetric

Original Articles

Visualizing the Influence of Social Networks on Recovery: A Mixed-Methods Social Identity Mapping Study with Recovering Adolescents

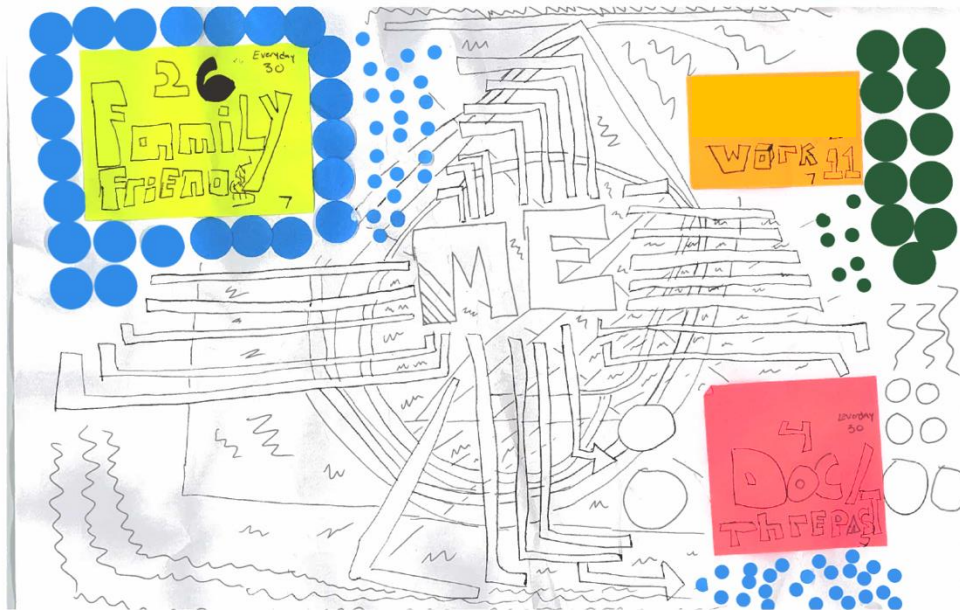
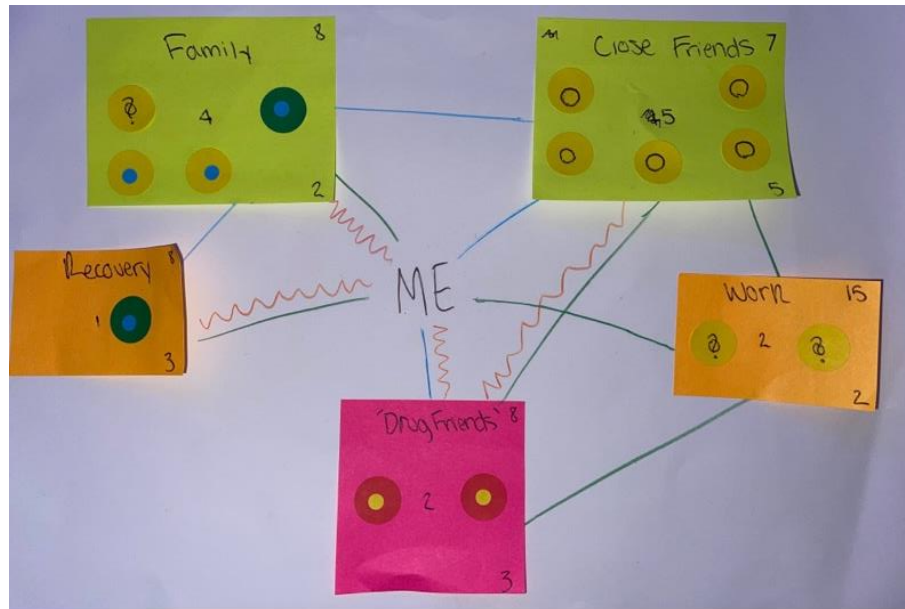
Emily A. Hennessy , Jordan Jurinsky, Kiefer Cowie, Agata Z. Pietrzak, Sophia Blyth, Paige Krasnoff, ...show all

Pages 1405-1415 | Published online: 13 May 2024

Cite this article

<https://doi-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.1080/10826084.2024.2352618>

 Check for updates



Network Supports and Barriers

Group types (n = 108; inpatient sample)

4.9 groups on average (range 2-17)

Alcohol and drug use (n = 108; inpatient sample)

Conflict

Belonging/Connection

Identity & Stigma

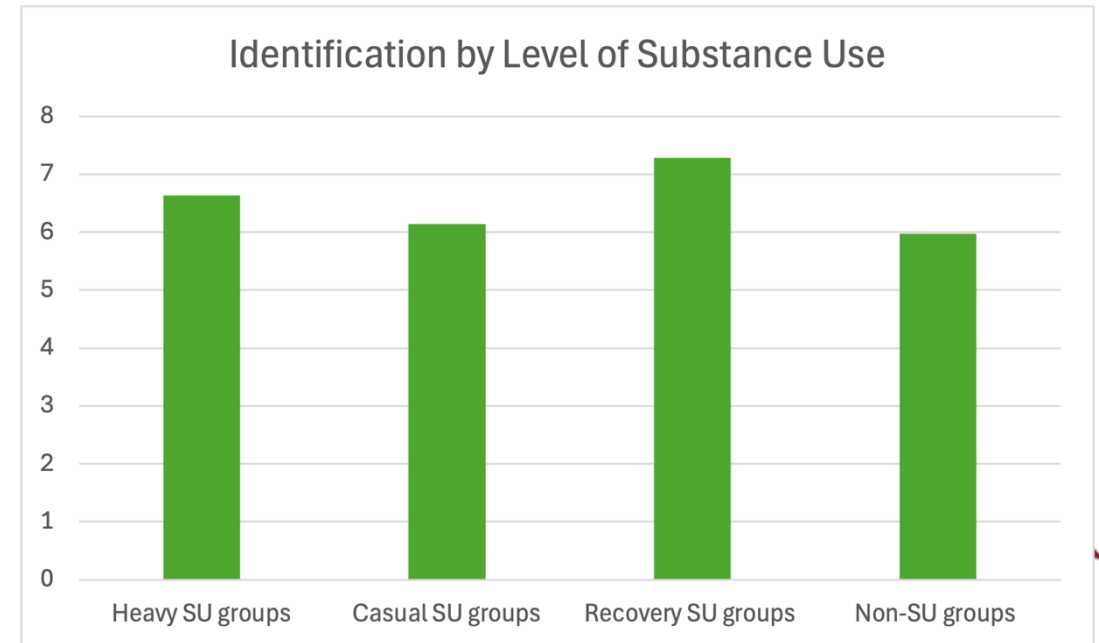
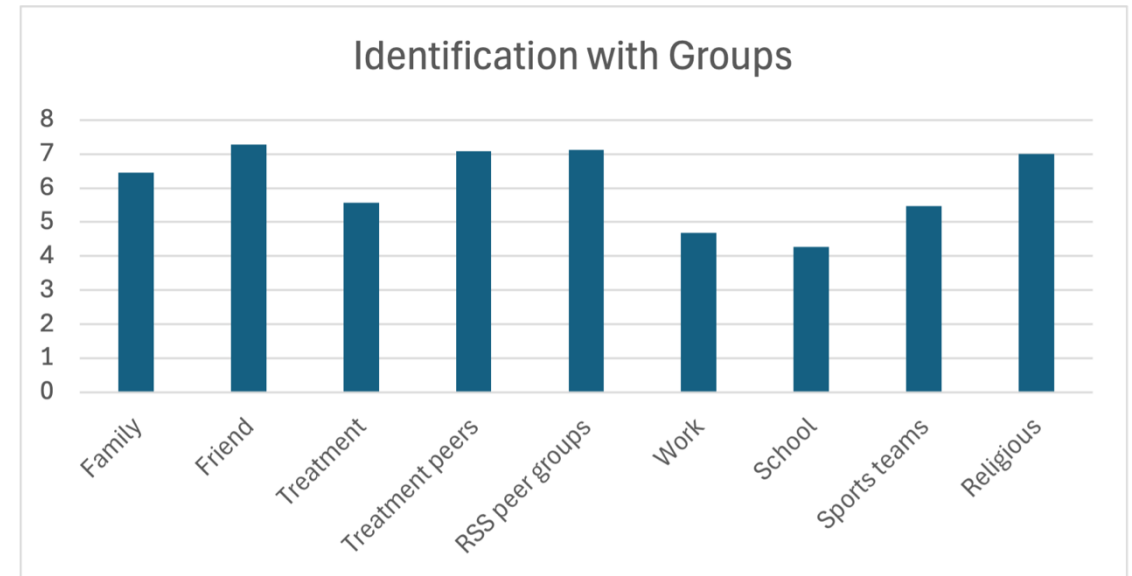
Group Type	Total Number of Groups	Range of Number of Groups
Family (n = 104)	135	0-6
Friend (n = 102)	185	0-8
Treatment (n = 34)	38	0-2
Treatment Peers (n = 50)	53	0-2
RSS Peers (n = 23)	24	0-2
Work (n = 34)	37	0-2
School (n = 25)	26	0-2
Religious (n = 4)	4	0-1
Sports Team (n = 15)	17	0-2
Pets (n = 6)	6	0-1

Network Supports and Barriers

Group types

Alcohol and drug use (n = 108; inpatient sample)

- 46% had treatment peer group
- 21% had peer RSS group
- 70% had at least 1 heavy SU group
 - 97% had heavy/casual SU group
- 12% had heavy SU family group
- 57% had a heavy SU friend group



Network Supports and Barriers

Group types

Alcohol and drug use (n = 108; inpatient sample)

Conflict

Belonging/Connection

Identity & Stigma

- Those with **more recovery groups** had **3 fewer days of alcohol use** than those with **no recovery groups**
- Those with **heavy substance use groups** had **11 more days of marijuana use** and **7 more days of other drug use** than youth without any heavy substance use groups
- Those with **no heavy use groups or at least one recovery group** had **higher recovery capital** compared to youth with at least one heavy use group or no recovery groups

Network Supports and Barriers

Group types

Alcohol and drug use

Conflict (n = 108; inpatient sample)

Belonging/Connection

Identity and Stigma

~1 high conflict, 2 moderate conflict and 2-3 low conflict groups in networks: **Females** reported **slightly more high conflict groups**

- More **high conflict groups** associated with **lower recovery capital** ($r = -0.23, p < .05$)
- More **low conflict groups** associated with **higher recovery capital** ($r = 0.23, p < .05$).



Network Supports and Barriers

Group types

Alcohol and drug use

Conflict

Belonging/Connection (n = 28)

Identity and Stigma

They let me talk to them about recovery and actually help me to set boundaries with them about what I'm comfortable with being around, never complaining or seeming upset if they can't use around me.

My college friends... encouraged me to be the best version of myself and work hard. And they also are really— make me excited about next year.

I usually go to the addicts or my sober friends, because I can tell them anything in the whole world and they won't say a single thing and be like get out of here.



Network Supports and Barriers

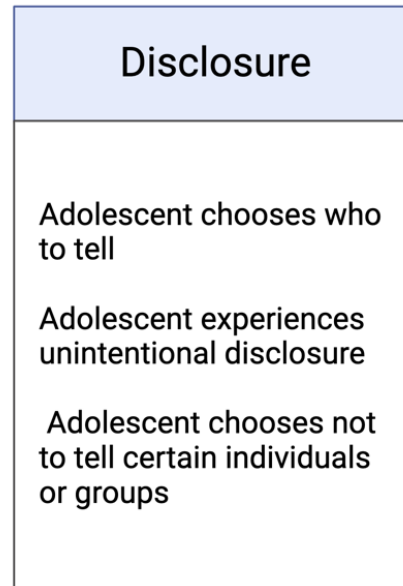
Group types

Alcohol and drug use

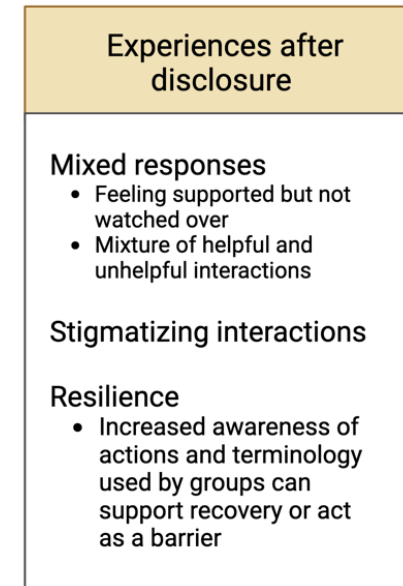
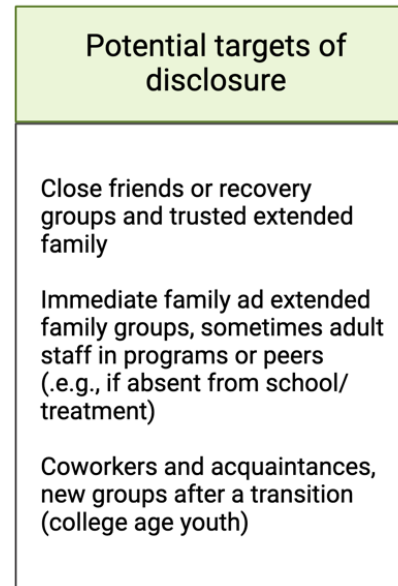
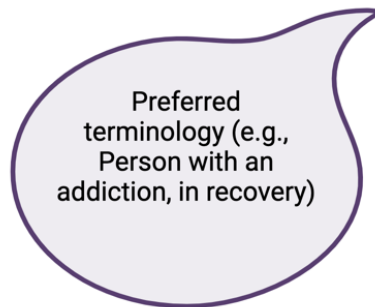
Conflict

Belonging/Connection

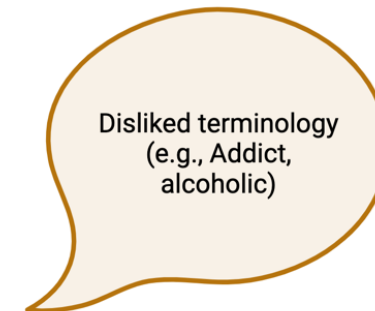
Identity & Stigma (n = 28)

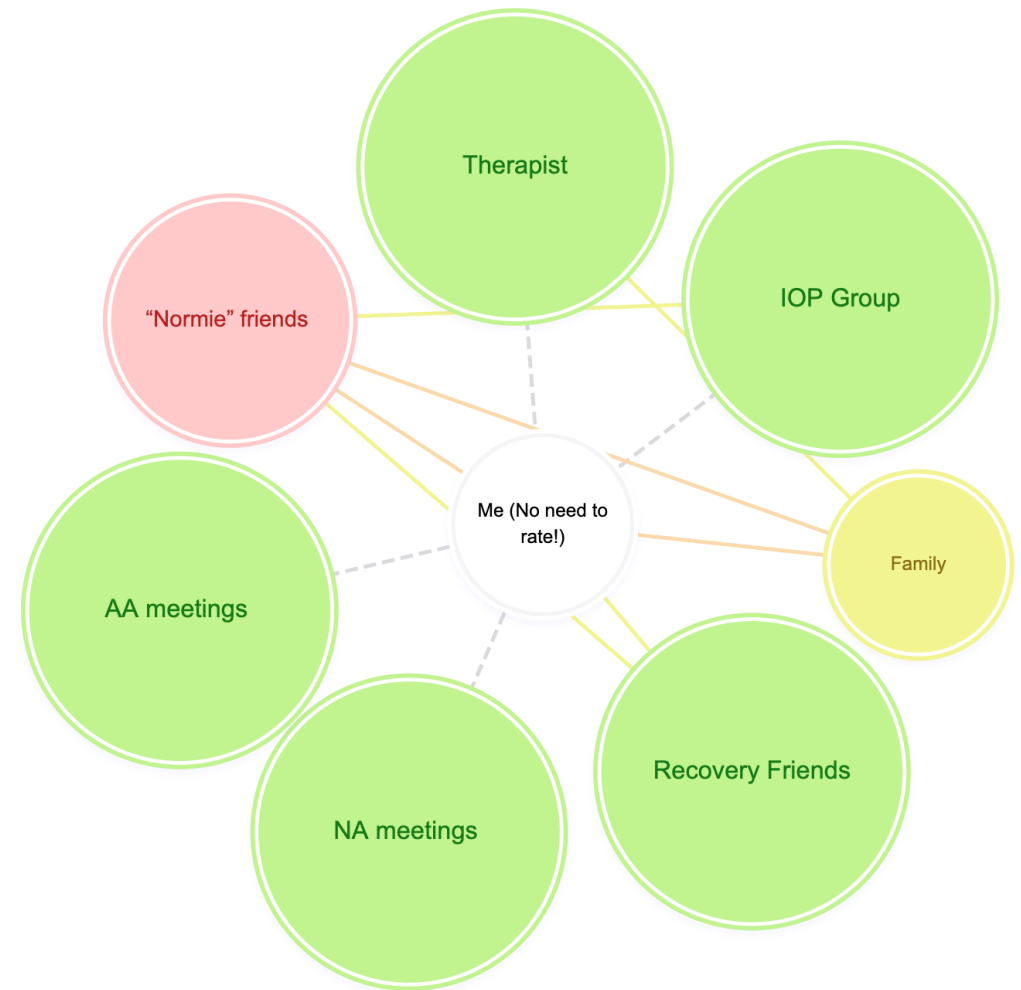


Word Usage

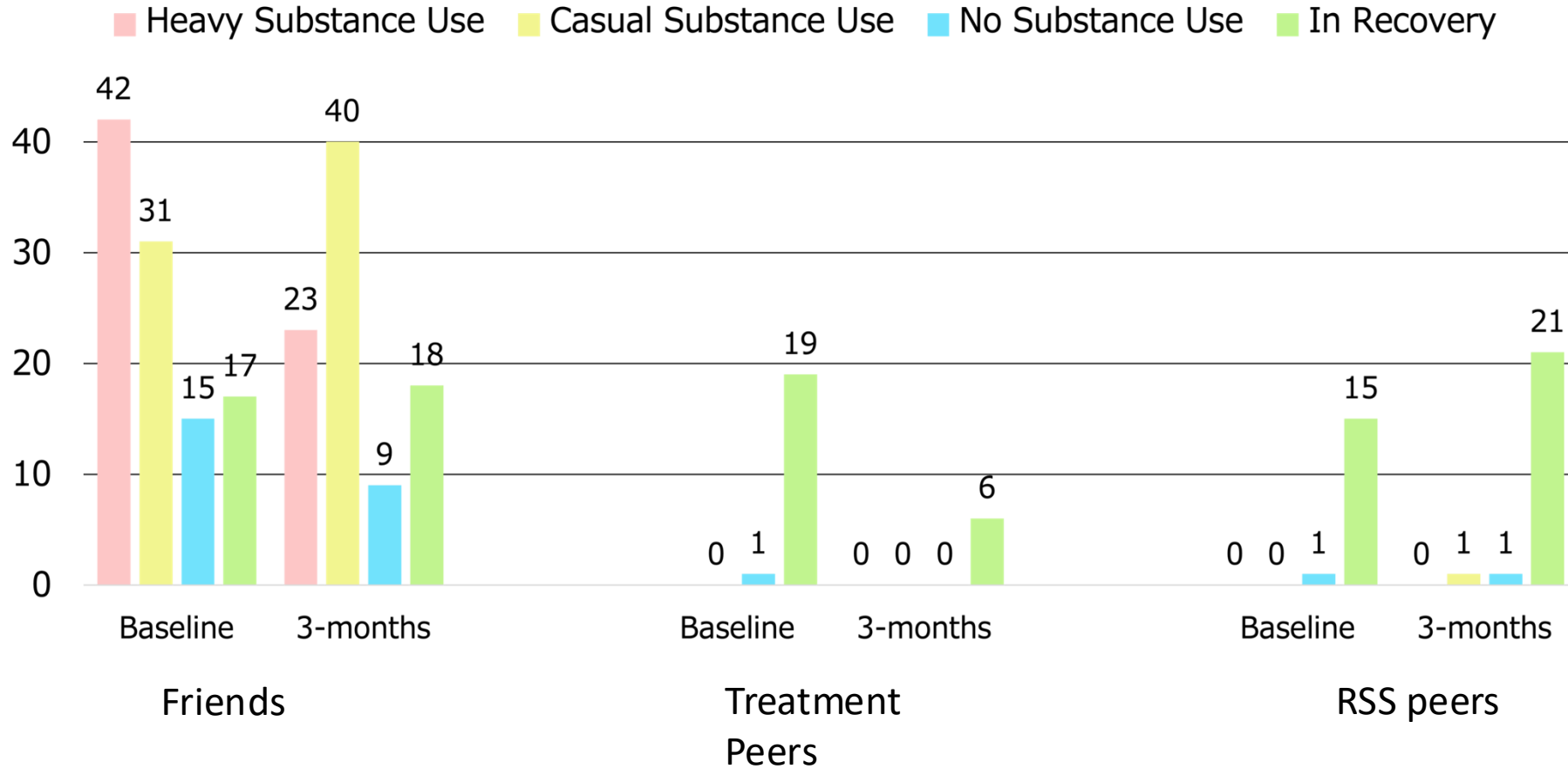


Word Usage





Subset of 60 participants in inpatient treatment



Social Group Characteristics: M = 5.9 groups (SD = 2)



How does this group support your recovery? Operationalizing support...

Supportive Relationships

“They **pressure me to not smoke** while **encouraging me to activities to boost my mood**. Together we find other ways to keep me busy and occupied.”

“They let me **talk to them** about recovery and actually help me to **set boundaries** with them about what I’m comfortable with being around, **never complaining** or seeming upset if they can’t use around me...”

Un-Supportive Relationships

“Not supportive want me to continue to use as they **see me as more fun when I use.**”

“I don’t get much support from using friends, **they often try to get me to use.**”

Mixed Support Relationships

“People I **can trust and I love** but i know for the better **I can’t be around them or I will use again**. I have made many friends by using and it’s hard to let go of the drug but also the friends.”

“They **respect my boundaries** but **talk about using frequently.**”

“[They] want we to smoke some times but are ok with me being sober and provide support.”

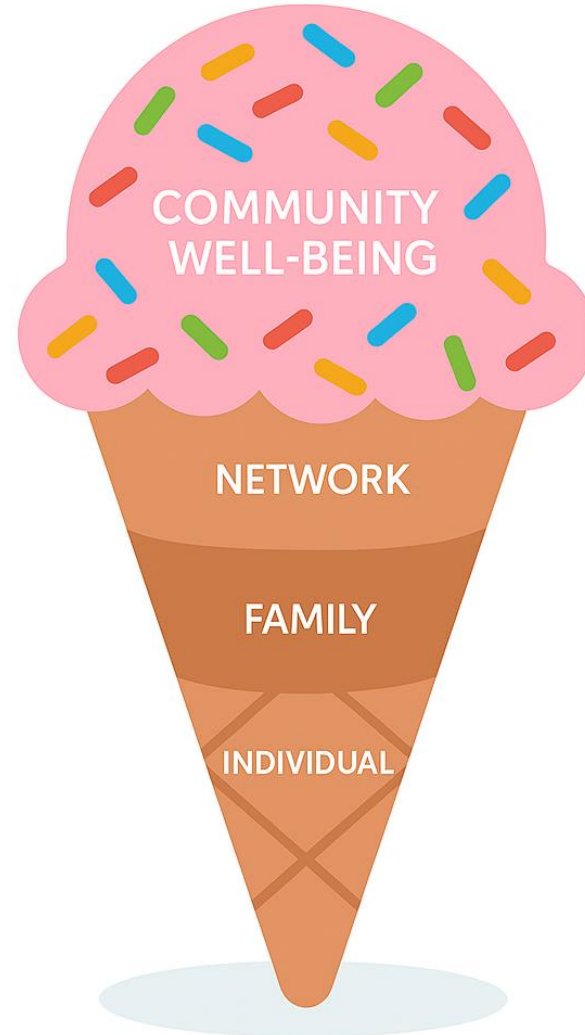


Summary of Research Findings

- Individuals in the recovery process report many relationships with individuals who use substances in their social groups
 - Also report relationships with individuals who are not using substances or are in recovery
- Conflict is present throughout these relationships - many sources and types of conflict
- SIM is a useful tool for understanding the recovery process: visual and hands-on, “fun”
 - Possibly useful for organizations to demonstrate their influence in the recovery process
- SIM could be a useful for intervening in the recovery process: may promote the development of insight**



Trickle-up effects of building recovery capital



Emily Hennessy

ehennessy@mgh.harvard.edu

recoveryanswers.org

youthrecoveryanswers.org

 Recovery Research

   @RecoveryAnswers

 recoveryanswers.org

