

## Establishing a Recovery Community Bedrock of Mutual Interest to Build a Future On

*“The beauty and the tragedy of the modern world is that it eliminates many situations that require people to demonstrate a commitment to the collective good.” — Sebastian Junger, **Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging***

Structures of healing and circles of recovery support have long been built on shifting sands, necessitating deep foundations. We have had to dig to great depth for bedrock. It is grounded in the generations of determined recovery advocates and their allies who toil together to change things, so those who come after us have better opportunities to heal. This is because addiction and its continuum are complex, nuanced and poorly understood. The spectrum of healing from them is equally complex and even less well understood. Substance use disorders are arguably our greatest domestic challenge, [killing more people](#) and causing more devastation across society than any other. Despite the carnage, the underlying complexity and deeply held negative perceptions about us lead to the shifting sands on which we build. We are left with meager resources and limited infrastructure to help people and communities heal.



Because of complexity and deeply held societal biases, resources thin out closest to the ground, further straining efforts within the impacted community. Groups fight each other over crumbs on the floor. These dynamics are exacerbated by what William White termed [snake oil sellers, hustlers and hucksters](#). They are not new; they have long profited by exploiting the vulnerable with flashy remedies and promising solutions. [Gold cures](#) and gold standards offering tantalizingly simple remedies for complex conditions that require much [more rigorous](#), whole person, full community engagement to resolve. The hustlers and hucksters benefit from a vacuum of accountability. They are adept at flourishing in this environment. Oversight institutions historically fail to address these challenges. Institutions are comprised of people who hold the very same negative views as the rest of society. We are not viewed as capable of healing, so we do not really matter. Simple solutions in this environment are always seductive. The dynamics between hucksters and our institutions lead to illusions of progress masking decay.

Despite the shifting sands that recovery movements over millennia have faced, history is instructive. We are capable of forward progress when we find and nurture commonality. This occurs when we adhere to shared values and hold agreements of shared responsibility in pursuit of mutual goals. Grounded in a strong sense of responsibility to each other in pursuit of a common vision. Trust, purpose, and mutual positive regard are the connective tissue that bonds our tribe.

### Bedrock Agreements of Mutual Responsibility to Each Other and To a Common Vision of Recovery

- **Centering efforts on what impacts one of us impacts all of us** – As penned by Martin Luther King, Jr in his [letter from a Birmingham Jail](#), “we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” What my colleague [Laurie Johnson-Wade](#) of [Lost Dreams Awakening](#) terms [Ubuntu Recovery](#). At its core, 'humanity to others' that holds community through the belief that 'I am what I am because of who we all are.' Avoiding processes that hold some of us up and push others of us down. Institutions encourage push down processes by rewarding “go along to get along” dynamics, leading to a system of care that cannot change because it ignores fundamental challenges. The latter leading to all of us being harmed.
- **Respecting differences of perspective** – The road of not respecting each other’s perspectives always leads to increased fragmentation and ultimately, failure for us all. Recovery itself is instructional here. On an individual level it often involves a fundamental shift in our relationship with drugs from panacea to pandora’s box. All of us, and especially you and I have found life by reconsidering our views on the very addictions that were killing us. We were so profoundly wrong in the grips of addiction that we begin to understand that recovery is grounded in humility. To

move forward together requires us to extend this orientation of humility to each other's views. No one among us holds all the answers. Solutions require mutual respect for each other's perspectives.

- **Listening to understand areas of mutual agreement** – Otherwise known as [comprehensive listening](#), which refers to a systematic and thorough approach to listening that takes into account contextual and personal filters, self-assessment, and goal-setting to promote ongoing development in listening skills. The tools to explore commonality. This requires us to examine our own [confirmation bias](#) in ways that run parallel with how we heal. This is vital to developing trust and safe space. It requires groups to spend time with each other in ways that support authentic dialogue, which differs from staged efforts of consensus through two dimensional processes like surveys or polls intended to seek input on limited topics pre-framed with the result in mind from the outset.
- **Understanding what has come before us to understand what to do moving forward** – Recovery history is fraught with efforts that failed despite the best of intentions. These are complex conditions that exist within a society with deep negative perceptions of the impacted community. Even efforts that were effective have been time limited, it requires groups to work together over the long term to achieve real progress. There is no effective way forward that does not include deep understanding of what came before us. A byproduct of pursuing deep understanding of the history of the recovery movement is a profound sense of humility. We are only here as a result of many generations of effort. Every possible movement forward includes potential unintended consequences. Understanding recovery movements that have preceded our own. It shows us we can do great things, but also how we are subject to a myriad of internal and external risks to our unity of purpose. Our collective efforts are quite fragile.
- **Standing for authenticity of representation** – There are a myriad of corporate, governmental, and other interest groups operating in our space. Their interests differ from ours. Without focus on authenticity, they risk double agency. From [William White topical quotes](#), “the assurance that the organization is led by and on behalf of individuals and families in recovery and their vetted allies. It is a pledge of watchfulness on the issue of double agency—persons who may present themselves as representatives of the recovery community who, unconsciously or with intent, represent other personal, ideological, institutional, or financial interests.” We need to ensure authenticity of representation in matters that impact us. Outside groups with a genuine focus on recovery-oriented systems of care understand that authenticity of recovery representation is vital to their interests as well and avoid it.
- **Upholding the value of everyone is a leader, no one is a leader** – As noted in this 2021 piece [Reflections on Recovery Leadership](#), the past is littered with charismatic leaders who brought groups together but failed to support core movement objectives. Ego, ambition, and money consistently steered efforts over a cliff. The call to the limelight is ever so seductive and ever so destructive. This is what examination of our own history shows us. We need [recovery custodians, not recovery rockstars](#). We live in a media fueled world that promotes rockstar imagery. There is a fine line between using media to communicate our collective needs and becoming the poster child of the cause. Rockstar recovery is erosive of community as gurus are elevated. We must constantly refocus the energy on our collective purpose and away from the siren song of guru or rockstar status. Failure to do so can only lead to loss of focus on movement objectives and far too often, tragic ends to those held under the bright lights of public spectacle.
- **Rejection of harm under the guise of help** – Harm camouflaged as help can take many forms, from groups who claim to help people but place profit ahead of all other priorities, to small, time limited and competitive grants held up as support for recovery community that end up creating division and not sustained support, or the plastering of recovery terms over efforts to coopt and commodify our community. Such efforts tokenization us as a means to support goals not centered on our collective interests. No entity who truly cares about us treats us in this manner. No entity that cares about our community commodifies us or frames our healing as simple two-dimensional short-term interventions that ultimately fail us. Communities must be engaged authentically to define their own help.
- **Respect our allies, stay in our own lane, and insist on the same in return** – There are a myriad of interests related to but distinct from recovery. These include prevention, treatment, and harm reduction. Related objectives across the domains are pursued by private and public companies, funding entities and governmental institutions. They overlap in many ways yet have discrete interests. The risk of merging lanes for us is a loss of focus on recovery, both internally and externally. This will result in dilution of focus on recovery and cooptation of our energy to these other areas of interest, typically the ones in which the most money stands to be gained. This is what William White cautioned us about in one of his most important papers - [State of the New Recovery Advocacy in 2013](#).
- **Presentation of a united front** – Negative perceptions about addiction and recovery are prevalent across our society. Much ink has been spilled by research groups that show we are still seen as people who are less worthy, less capable, and inferior in a myriad of ways. These views are often so subtle that people who hold them do not even recognize that they relate to us from a place of deep bias. Any fragmentation of our fragile community becomes a means to

discount us. These dynamics are also not new. Yet, history is also instructive to us that the only way to rise up and overcome the forces of implicit bias we face is to focus on common purpose in order to amplify our collective message in a manner that highlights our strengths. Unity of purpose is the vital ingredient to rise above interference.

Our movement has been drifting away from common ground for some time. To move things forward, we need safe space devoted to open dialogue. History is also instructive here. Years ago, we would come together as a national community, we had meetings to discuss things to work through our issues. This differs from our era, in which there are typically events that bring us together with pre-established objectives focused on defined themes that end in a paper. While this has some benefits, it does not support the establishment of bedrock through storming norming and forming dynamics. This would require many open-ended conventions. It would require resources. It would be well worth the investment. The beneficiaries of such a process extend beyond our community to our larger society. Effective healing efforts must include the impacted community in authentic ways. This is the unrealized promise we hold for our broader society.

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