



How to Handle the “*Are you in Recovery?*” Question, if you are not in Recovery

I started in what has been traditionally referred to as addiction treatment during what could be considered a transitional period for the field. Prior to the start of my career in the early 1990's, the field of addiction treatment adhered mostly to the 12 Step model, as a large percentage of counselors were recovering addicts themselves, active in 12 Step groups on their own. The field gradually started to become increasingly “professionalized” as people with Masters Degrees were being sought out to join the addiction treatment field as opposed to counselors who learned the ropes primarily through personal recovery experience. Previously, it was common for those individuals who completed their own substance abuse rehabilitation to seek out a certification in alcohol or drug counseling then begin working in the field. Early on, many of these “addicts turned recovering counselors” had only a High School education, GED or less, but the field eventually evolved toward requiring more formal education over time.

I mean no disrespect toward anyone who followed that path into the counseling field. Experience in “the rooms” (12 Step programs), has produced some excellent counselors with some amazing insight and wisdom which has been invaluable in assisting thousands of other addicts along the path of recovery. I however, am from the “new school” of counselors in the field as a non-recovering person, trained in a Master's program with experience gained primarily through internships and employment. Sure, I did my own share of using myself in high school and college, even getting into some minor legal problems, but like most non-addicts, with time and maturity I simply grew out of the behavior of abusing alcohol and other substances. Getting a job, starting a career, eventually getting married and having children and changing my values with time served as strong motivation to stop using illegal drugs and stop using alcohol in excess. Like other non-addicts, I never went to rehab and I never participated in a 12 Step group (outside of required participation for school and for licensure) in order to stop abusing substances.

Early in my days as a substance abuse counselor who myself was not in recovery, I initially felt at a disadvantage when compared with those who had the personal experience of 12 Step recovery especially when working in a 12 Step based treatment setting. The clients in many of these programs themselves often played into the idea that non-recovering counselors are inferior and less helpful. “How can you help me if you don't know what it's like to be an addict?” was at times the rallying cry of clients when they found out I was not an addict. When faced with that question, a non-recovering counselor has several choices with regard to how to handle this challenge. Lying and pretending to be an addict was out of the question for several reasons. First, I knew it was dishonest and hypocritical to try to teach others to be open and honest if I myself were perpetrating a fraud. Not to mention the work that would be required in maintaining such a charade as well as the ever present risk of being exposed as an imposter that would be utterly destroy any rapport. Some graduate level educational programs teach counselors to turn the focus back onto the client, by answering their questions with more questions essentially. That method in theory seems reasonable but in practice is a total disaster for anyone who has tried it. That ineffective approach usually ends up going something like this in a substance abuse group:

GROUP MEMBER “So tell me counselor, are you in recovery? Have you ever been addicted to anything?”

COUNSELOR (Following the “turn it back on them” script he was taught in Graduate School): “Why is important for you to know that? What does it mean to you for me to be in recovery?”

It is easy to guess where the conversation goes from there. The group members all know that this lame attempt at deflecting the question simply is an effort to avoid admitting that there is no personal history of addiction. At best it is only a temporary deflection. Usually, this approach destroys what is left of the counselor's credibility because most people in treatment can see right through it.



“What about handling this inevitable question head on, rather than dodging it?” was a question that I immediately asked myself as a 20-something year-old neophyte addictions counselor. “Rather than viewing being a non-recovering counselor as a weakness, what are the potential strengths of this situation?” Since I and other counselors who were not in recovery but working in 12 Step based programs were going to face the question about our personal status repeatedly, it just made sense to tell the straight truth about not being in recovery and get it out of the way right from the start. Also, I wanted to challenge the long-held assumption that being in recovery *automatically* makes someone a better counselor, when in reality *there is no actual evidence proving that to be so*.

Over the years as a new counselor, I had heard all of the positives about being a counselor in recovery and how people in recovery bring their personal experience, strength and hope to the table in their work with other addicts. I had heard about the deeper level of understanding and empathy that someone could display if they had “been there” themselves and had the personal experience of struggling with an addiction. I knew that someone who had worked the 12 Steps personally could reason that they are better suited to teach others how to work the steps themselves and to warn them of some of the mistakes they made in the process. These obvious strengths that a recovering counselor brings to the table in a therapeutic setting are legitimate and they can be helpful in the counseling relationship. Nevertheless, after only a short time of working in the field, I could clearly see that this issue was not that simple. I was surprised to see as many recovering counselors actually stumble and fail with clients as I had seen those who were successful. I can remember seeing counselors with decades of sober time prove to be repeatedly ineffective with those they were helping. Why was that happening if recovery experience was supposedly the key to being a good addictions counselor? That is because being in recovery is *not a requirement* to be a good substance abuse counselor and I was determined to find a simple way to illustrate that point.

I decided to consider the other side of the coin with regard to the “addicts helping addicts” scenario. In my own work with clients, particularly younger ones, I noticed a growing group of drug and alcohol abusers who rejected the 12 Steps no matter how nicely the whole thing was packaged and presented to them. This group struggled for one reason or another with the 12 Step ideology and as a result often lacked the connection with some of the staff who themselves had been trained in the 12 Steps through their own experience. I had at last found the piece of the puzzle that was being ignored: The so often overlooked *disadvantage* that a counselor who is in recovery may experience is that if one’s own personal recovery experience is their primary tool for helping others, this approach may actually end up alienating rather than helping those who reject a similar path for themselves. By this reasoning, the counselor who himself succeeded in the 12 Steps and therefore prescribes the 12 Steps to all others as the primary path for change is at a loss with any client who himself rejects the 12 Steps. If a counselor’s personal experience with the 12 Steps is all that he or she has, then a client who rejects the 12 Steps is beyond the scope of that counselor’s ability. This coincides with the belief that there are multiple paths to recovery and growth and counselors cannot afford to limit themselves to accepting only one path. In those situations, using personal experience can do more harm than good.

Therefore, the “Hey counselor, are you in recovery?” question and answer session that so often came up in group therapy evolved into something much more like this for me going forward:

GROUP MEMBER “So tell me counselor, are you in recovery? Have you ever been addicted to anything?”

COUNSELOR (Taking the question head-on as opposed to redirecting or refocusing the issue):
“Actually, no, I am not in recovery and I do not consider myself to be an addict or an alcoholic”

GROUP MEMBER “So how are you supposed to be able to help me get clean if you don’t even know what it’s like to be an addict?” (Client is setting the trap to discredit the counselor’s ability)



COUNSELOR” I see what you are getting at; a counselor who has experienced and overcome an addiction often has a deeper understanding of what it’s like to be addicted to something which can be really helpful (pause). But, did anyone ever consider the upside of working with a counselor who is *not* in recovery themselves?” – [Discussion opened up to group for a while to see what they say, as many in the group may actually see the advantages]

COUNSELOR- “It is important to consider that someone who has taken one particular path to recovery themselves may try to get you to follow the same path that worked for them. But suppose that path is not the right one for you? That could be a problem. As a non-recovering counselor, I am not bringing a particular agenda to the table based on my own experience, but rather a non-recovering counselor is more inclined to *let you follow your own path to recovery*. (Allow for discussion)

At this point counselor can close and summarize with this simple truth:

COUNSELOR: “In reality, there are some excellent counselors who are in recovery – but there are also some who are not so good. Likewise, there are some lousy counselors who have never been in recovery themselves, but yet there are also some excellent ones who have never touched a drug in their lives. There is actually a lot more behind what makes someone a good counselor beside that persons personal experience.(Allow for discussion of positive qualities like empathy, sincerity, consistency, etc. that are far more important than whether or not someone is in recovery)

In summary, I am not questioning the effectiveness of a person who is a recovering addict as a counselor. To the contrary, as discussed earlier, the person in recovery has a wealth of valuable personal experience to draw upon in the counseling setting. However, the recovering counselors who are truly successful with a wide range of clients are those who are able to look outside of their own recovery experience. The process involved with overcoming substance use issues goes way beyond “just don’t drink and go to meetings”. There are many excellent recovering counselors who are able to use their experience *discriminately* in their work as counselors as opposed to *exclusively*. If all that a counselor brings to the table is their own personal story then they are going to be very limited with regard who they can actually help, particularly when working with those who are not interested in following the same path.

At the same time I have personally witnessed many inexperienced counselors and even student-interns from who have never been to the “hood”, never even smoked a joint, or tried any drug yet they were highly effective working with even hard core, street addicts. That is because as a clean slate, the counselor who lacks personal experience at times can engage those who have heard the same old stories over and over from people in recovery. Therefore, when supervising and training people in recovery over the years I have always taught recovering counselors to first learn to be a good counselor without needing to rely on their own personal experience as a teaching tool. The counselor who from the start of his career uses his personal story of recovery as the main tool for helping others runs the risk of becoming a “one trick pony.” If that is the case, and a counselor in that situation comes across someone who is not interested or impressed with the counselor’s personal recovery story, then the counselor can be stuck in a corner if he doesn’t have something else to offer.

Regardless of whether someone themselves is in recovery or not, the counseling process transcends personal experience. Counselors, regardless of their recovery status and personal background need to be both open minded and flexible and always willing to listen and learn as much as they are willing to teach. Individual qualities that are essential to the therapeutic process in counseling, such as empathy, warmth, sincerity, patience, and being nonjudgmental are far more important than a counselor’s ability to demonstrate superficial credibility through personal stories and experiences with addiction. Most of all the ability to be person-centered and engaging in one’s attitude and approach



with all types of people we work with is of the utmost importance, regardless of whether or not we share a common set of background experiences.



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