

We didn't think full recovery was possible either!

Most of us did not think full recovery was possible.

We thought we had tried everything, and that having an eating disorder was a chronic and permanent condition. Many of us now realize we were mistaken and that our old ideas had been holding us back from a life of greater freedom and joy.

A longitudinal study done at 9 and 22 years follow-up (Eddy et al., 2017) echoed earlier studies that found **approximately two thirds of people with eating disorders recovered**. This research contradicts beliefs about the permanence of eating disorders, showing that the majority of people *fully recover*. However, many of us focused on the "empty" part of the glass, feeling certain that we would be among the minority who don't. Until we believed full recovery was achievable *for us*, we balked. If this sounds like you, *don't give up!* We were there, too! We may never know why some do not recover, but we are living proof that having the courage to trust EDA's process and work through challenges does enable us to recover.

Twelve Step Programs and Full Recovery

Some of us found the idea of "full recovery" disconcerting, thinking that EDA ideas did not align with AA concepts. We found it helpful to remember the foreword to the 1st edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous* (p. xiii), which states that the text was written by "men and women who have **recovered** from a seemingly hopeless state of mind and body" (bolding added). **This idea of full recovery is at the heart of the AA as well as the EDA program.**

As the AA text affirms, with respect to alcohol, AA members "are not fighting it, neither are we avoiding temptation. **We feel as though we have been placed in a position of neutrality—safe and protected.** We have not even sworn off. Instead, the problem has been removed. It does not exist for us" (AA Big Book, p. 85).

Isn't being in full recovery from an eating disorder the same as being "happy, joyous, and free" in AA? We in EDA affirm, "Yes, absolutely!" The idea of full recovery does not substantially differentiate EDA from AA. As noted above and elsewhere in the AA Big Book, throughout the EDA Big Book, and in the 9th Step Promises of both programs, members reach a new state in which they are no longer vulnerable in the same way. Nor does the idea of full recovery differentiate EDA from NA, which does not hold the adage "once an addict always an addict" to be true.

Key point: We in EDA agree with AA, the original 12-Step program, that working the program leads to full recovery. When old patterns of thought come up, we react sanely and normally. **We need never return to our old ways of coping, and we need not fear them.**

What does it mean to be fully recovered?

EDA endorses that we can fully recover from eating disordered behaviors such as restricting, bingeing, purging, and ideas such as obsession with food and body image. These ideas and behaviors are often motivated by powerful internal drivers ranging from perfectionism and stoicism to difficulties regulating emotional intensity and trust issues. We think that through using the tools of our program (meetings, sponsorship, and step work) we have transformed not only eating disordered behaviors but those underlying challenges. In some cases, traits changed; in other cases, we were able to bring traits experienced solely as defects into more balance, making them assets to our pursuit of health and service as we recovered.

Being overly focused on immediately eliminating specific behaviors, or "abstinence," can lead to rigidity of thought and habit. Thus, EDA doesn't set "abstinence" aside as a goal unto itself. However, we *do* break free of old behaviors once we feel safe relying on new thinking and actions that work better to solve our problems. Early recovery is often characterized by episodic return to old behaviors as we discover what works—and doesn't work—for us individually.

Researchers and clinical professionals increasingly acknowledge that abstinence from behaviors and restoration of physical health are only one aspect of being recovered; full recovery means deeper changes in thinking and relationships, leading to a more fulfilling and complete life (Bardone-Cone et al., 2010).

This rich, full recovery is not an overnight matter. Like happiness, it is a byproduct of thinking and doing the right things, including focusing on and reinforcing the positives—recognizing what we are doing right and celebrating it. Trusting the process, working the steps, and using the tools, even if it takes time, *does* lead to changes in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

What do those changes feel like? **EDA's 9th Step Promises sums it up:** "If we are painstaking about this phase of our development, we will know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word serenity, and we will know peace. No matter how far down we have fallen, we will see how our experience can benefit others. That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change. Fear of people and of economic insecurity will leave us. We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us. We will see that our service to God, our Higher Power, or the greater good has done for us what seemed humanly impossible. Are these extravagant promises? We think not. They are being fulfilled among us—sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always materialize if we work for them" (EDA Big Book, p. 185, with reference to the AA Big Book, pp. 83-84).

References

Bardone-Cone, A. M., et al. (2010). *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 48(3), 194–202.
Eddy, K. T., et al. (2017). *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 78(2), 184–189.

EDA Members Describe Full Recovery

"Now, when I have Thanksgiving with my family, it's about the people: getting excited about the opportunity to convey warmth and attention to those I love and rarely see. I enjoy food without second-guessing what I ate or how much, even if I ate a lot. I've lost the obsession with food altogether."

"Now, when I try on clothes, I don't think about the size, I think about whether it fits and looks good."

"Even in full recovery, I sometimes I have negative body image thoughts. I think everybody does! Today, I recognize these thoughts can come from society rather than from me—a 'societal ED' not a personal 'ED'. I don't listen to either, anymore!"

"Now, when I fall down, I just get back up. I accept it, learn what I can, and move on instead of beating myself up."

"I've picked up the pieces of my life. And I just signed up for grad school. I'd been thinking I would, but all of a sudden, it was just the next right thing to do."

"In full recovery, I react differently. For instance, something just happened that messed up my plans. Instead of getting upset, I took it in stride and asked what I could do to be of service. That felt great!"

"Recovery took root once I started focusing on what was going right. A surprise: I am more effective than ever since I stopped fighting myself."

"I used to waste enormous amounts of time and energy suppressing my emotions because I was scared of their intensity. I didn't like them, didn't think I could change. Now, I can use all that energy—which comes from caring about people, even though it was so messed up before—to do things that matter."

"I care how I feel inside my body. I love food. I love sex. I love books. I love music. Most of all, I love that I have the peace and freedom to enjoy these *without fear*, as a by-product of thinking about issues, defining resolutions, and then just doing the next right thing. Laughter helps me stay in balance."

"The cravings are gone. I don't get the urge to binge or restrict or purge anymore. It took time, but those urges are gone. I never imagined that would be possible, but it is!"

Practices that Build Full Recovery

According to a 2018 survey, EDA members in full recovery identified the following as key practices that helped them build a strong recovery*:

Positivity, learning to reframe negative thinking in positive terms, e.g., "I am enough"; loving people exactly as they are, without expectations

Self-acceptance and gratitude for who we chose to be, for what we can do, and for our bodies, e.g., "I love what I can do now that I am healthy"

Building trust with self and others

Connecting with others, especially others in 12-Step programs

Being of service to others and sponsoring others

Prayer and meditation; relying on God, Higher Power, or a higher purpose to find meaning and direction

Taking care of basics so we can be there for others, serve a higher purpose, and/or do God's will

Working the Steps and Traditions in all our affairs

Step 10: honesty and humility, focusing on what is going right, learning to process emotions, and defining good resolutions; journaling

EDA meetings and other 12-Step meetings

Planning ahead and preparing

Getting rid of rigidity and all-or-nothing thinking (Many mentioned the EDA Big Book helped them address these issues.)

A few numbers

A survey conducted in 2018 showed 28% of EDA members consider themselves fully recovered.

100% of those who consider themselves fully recovered agreed with EDA's ideas about full recovery expressed in the EDA Big Book.

Most people who described themselves as fully recovered have been involved with EDA for over a year, and the number of respondents in full recovery increased with length of time in EDA.

**Listed in order of frequency. Practices listed by fewer than 10% are combined or not shown.*

Fully Recovered



For more information please visit our website at:

www.4EDA.org

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