

6

Phases of Recovery From Opioid Addiction

FROM FINDING YOUR FOOTING TO FINDING
YOUR PURPOSE: *A Roadmap to Recovery*



Ideal Option

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If you're considering treatment for opioid addiction, you may have two competing thoughts in your head: I desperately want to stop, and I'm so afraid I'll fail.

That's 100% normal!

When you've spent years in the grip of addiction — behaving in ways you never thought possible, drifting far from the person you know yourself to be — recovery may seem daunting. Impossible, even.

But it's not. Not by a longshot.

No matter how deep a hole you think you've dug, no matter how many bridges you may have burned or how many years it's been, you can find your way back to a healthy, fulfilling, and peaceful life. A life that's not only free of drugs but also free of thoughts about drugs.

"I can't explain how good it feels," says Tera Thompson, 42, an Ideal Option patient in recovery for 3 years. "I hadn't been sober since I was 12. I was afraid of it. But it's total freedom."

No one will tell you recovery is easy, but all of our long-term patients will tell you recovery has changed them profoundly, in ways that make them never want to use opioids again.

"I'm like: This is me? This is how I feel when I'm sober?" says Tera, a hairdresser and mom who snorted pain pills for years and spent 8 months in prison. "I always thought I was a sad, broken person. Turns out, I'm not. If I'd known I could be this happy, I would have chosen recovery a long time ago."

Tera didn't rebuild her life overnight. After all, recovery isn't a brief chapter in life. It's not a project you undertake for 30 days or 90 days and then check off your list. Rather, it's a process, a lifelong journey, and it often unfolds in 6 phases.

PHASE 1: Stabilizing on Suboxone

PHASE 2: Attending to Your Health

PHASE 3: Setting Your Boundaries

PHASE 4: Finding Your Groove

PHASE 5: Repairing and Rebuilding

PHASE 6: Finding Your Purpose

The boundaries between phases are blurry. You don't "graduate" from one to the next, and everyone's path is unique.

Still, for most folks, recovery tends to follow a similar progression. In each phase, you feel more stable, more grounded, more confident and accepting of yourself. You're able to accomplish more and reach higher.

The early phases are about finding your footing. Later, you find your groove and shift to forward motion. Eventually, you're off and running — at your own pace.

Some phases may last a few weeks; others may span months or years. Recovery in the first month feels a whole lot different from recovery a year later. Recovery at 3 years feels like a universe away from where you began.

“At first, you’re just trying to get through the day while your body tries to regulate itself,” recalls 39-year-old Shante, who is 3 years into recovery. “I was tossing and turning at night and felt so much anxiety. Then I got over that hump, and learned to create simple, attainable goals. Then, I learned to make plans.”

You can’t rush the process, but you can work to keep yourself heading in the right direction.

“Set the expectation that: Hey, it’s going be rough for a bit,” advises Larry Nye, PA-C, senior director of education and research at Ideal Option. “Everyone wants instant gratification, but delayed gratification is the better way to go.”

Throughout your journey, you may not realize you’ve shifted from one phase to the next — well, until you do.

For Shante, her giant leap forward didn’t fully register until she earned her A.A. degree and completed her training as a substance use disorder counselor.

“I’m amazed,” says Shante, a single mom who served time in jail and returned to use countless times. “I got into addiction at such a young age that I didn’t have time to even know myself. Now I have a professional license and a career. It feels so different being on the other side.”

As you navigate your own route, you may want to pull up this guide from time to time and ask yourself what Larry Nye asks his patients: “Where are you in recovery? Are you on the path or off the path? What do you need to do to move a little farther ahead?”

Dare to imagine yourself in recovery, and give yourself a fighting chance to make the journey.

We’re here to help.



“I never thought I’d get to the point of normalcy, where I could live sober and feel peace and happiness. But here I am.”

-Mary PATIENT, IDEAL OPTION

PHASE 1

*Stabilizing on
Suboxone®*

In this first, critical phase of recovery, you have one job: Take your medication every day, exactly as instructed by your provider.

Every day, patients marvel at the power of Suboxone. Nausea, vomiting, muscle aches, restless legs, anxiety — the misery of withdrawal fades almost immediately. Cravings fizzle, too.

“The first time I took Suboxone, I was like, ‘Holy crap, I feel perfectly fine,’” recalls Willy, 30, an Ideal Option patient who, at a low point, stole from his parents to stay a step ahead of heroin withdrawal.

Suboxone works for addiction to all opioids — prescription pain pills, heroin, even fentanyl — but it’s not an express ticket to recovery. It’s an entry point. The medication helps restore your brain chemistry, affording you the chance to rebuild a life in disarray.

“You just don’t have the anxiety and cravings that make you spend your rent money and destroy your life and relationships,” says Greg, an Ideal Option patient. “Suboxone lets you stop and think.”

Patients often call Suboxone “magic” or “a miracle,” but its effectiveness also has a downside: Some patients feel so good they take less than they need and slip back into active addiction.

Even when new patients feel jazzed to start the recovery process, their follow-through can be tenuous, says Ideal Option director of provider relations, Ben Rae, ARNP, SPMHNP. “It is important to support our patients in the early phases of recovery keeping in mind the competing forces of their desire to gain sobriety and the triggers in their life.”

Taking the full dose once a day, every day, is essential. It takes 2 to 3 weeks to build up sufficient medication levels in your blood to fully knock back withdrawal and cravings. That’s when you can look out on the horizon, see possibility, and feel hope.

“When I first took Suboxone, something clicked in my brain that had never clicked before. My brain wasn’t racing. I wasn’t looking to be fulfilled.”

-Morgan 36 PATIENT, IDEAL OPTION

“When I started on Suboxone, I felt human again,” says Kyle, 53 an Ideal Option patient, husband, and dad, who fell into heroin addiction while working at a Chevy dealership. “I thought: I can make it. This is OK.”

Overcoming the Suboxone Stigma

No one belittles smokers for chewing nicotine gum to quit tobacco. No one demeans people with diabetes for taking insulin to stay alive. Yet Suboxone, proven to be a life-saving medication, often comes with a heavy dose of societal judgment.

“There’s a stigma that a drug is a drug is a drug,” says Kayla, 25, an Ideal Option patient with 3 years of recovery. Kayla started on Suboxone several times only to convince herself each time that taking medication is a crutch.

“I’d quit Suboxone prematurely and then relapse,” she says. “It was wash, rinse, repeat.”

Most patients can safely reduce their Suboxone dose after a few months and then settle on a low maintenance level. Some patients can wean off eventually. But if you quit Suboxone before your brain chemistry has recovered, a process that can take years, return to use is almost certain.

Kayla learned the hard way, landing back on the street each time she returned to use. Eventually, she contracted a heart infection that nearly killed her and spent three months in the hospital.

“Getting sick was terrifying,” she says. “After that, I knew I was going to stay sober and Suboxone was key to my recovery. I stopped looking to get off it.”

“I take a thyroid pill that helps me stay alive and feel healthy, so if I need Suboxone to do the same thing, so be it.”

-Ritamaría 33 PATIENT, IDEAL OPTION

PHASE 2

*Attending to
Your Health*

In this brief but important phase, your goal is to get evaluated for any health issues, mental and physical, that may have gone undiagnosed or untreated.

When your entire life revolves around using opioids, scheduling a dental cleaning or doctors' check-up is the last thing on your mind. But once you've stabilized on Suboxone, you'll have the wherewithal to get yourself looked after.

Many folks learn they have contracted hepatitis or sexually transmitted infections. Others discover that they have a mental health condition such as bipolar disorder or depression. Many need to have teeth extracted and replaced.

A visit with a primary care physician is the best place to start. A dental visit is important, too.

"Attending to your health dramatically changes the recovery landscape for many of our patients," says Ben Rae. "It's so exciting when you see patients who've had their teeth fixed. Their self-confidence is boosted 1,000%."

Rich's Story

As soon as Rich started taking Suboxone, the achiness and nausea of heroin withdrawal vanished.

Still, he felt off-kilter — unusually low on energy and enthusiasm. He had stopped restoring his cherished 1971 Camaro and quit playing video games with friends. His libido flagged.

"I wasn't depressed — I just felt tired all the time," says Rich, 38.

A doctor's visit explained why: His testosterone level had plummeted, a condition that was easily treated.

The same doctor also diagnosed Rich with anxiety disorder and prescribed treatment for his migraines. On a roll, Rich visited the dentist, too.

"I've taken care of stuff I put off for years," he says.

In retrospect, Rich says he was using drugs largely to medicate his anxiety and migraines. "Now I have no cravings to use and no reason to."

These days, Rich is beefing up his Camaro's engine and building furniture for his bedroom. And with his anxiety treated, he can visit the supermarket any time, rather than waiting until 10 p.m. for the store to clear out.

"I feel like a brand-new person."



PHASE 3

Setting Your Boundaries

In this phase, the real work — and joy — of recovery begins. You surround yourself with folks who are rooting for your success while cutting ties with those who will bring you down.

Enlisting a Supporter

With Suboxone in your system and your health on the mend, your recovery is gathering steam!

To maintain your momentum, it's important to find a supporter.

"You need someone who understands you and cares about you, someone who's cheering for you," says Larry Nye. "You need to celebrate recovery with others."

Having just one person in your corner can make all the difference — a sponsor, a counselor, a family member, a friend in recovery, a friend from church.

"Even if you feel you've burned all your bridges and don't have any friends who don't use drugs, you can still find support," says Ben Rae. "Human beings are meant to interact with other human beings. That support is vital."

When Geno enrolled in Ideal Option, he had lived on the street for years and had alienated his family. It was an addiction counselor who changed the course of his recovery.

"She genuinely cared about my feelings," says Geno, 24. "I had never had that kind of support, ever. I could tell her anything, and she gave me real solutions, not just, 'Oh, get over it.'"

Geno's counselor gave him the guidance and the confidence to schedule appointments and



make phone calls — to do all he needed to secure housing and financial assistance, enroll in a GED program, and start building a life.

"She told me, 'Go and try something you've never done. Get out of your comfort zone.'"

Geno took the advice to heart and taught himself to cook. He went from scrounging dumpsters for pizza to whipping up stuffed burgers and chicken Caesar wraps. "It's really rewarding to eat what you've made and enjoy how good it tastes," he says.

Embarking on recovery takes guts, but you have far more to gain than to lose. You may discover that your family and friends believe in you and care about you more than you'd ever imagined.

After years of heroin addiction, Kyle felt sure he'd alienated his wife. He had burned through the family's savings, stopped fishing with his boys — "I was the world's worst father," he says — and skipped family dinners, instead nodding off on his recliner with "a bag of chips, a Mountain Dew, and a snort of heroin."

Heading into treatment, Kyle thought his wife was done with him. "I was scared and didn't think I had support, but my wife was rock solid," he says. "She stuck by me. She's the biggest reason I'm here today."

"Early in treatment, the voice of guilt, shame, and criticism is so strong that it can be impossible to overcome on your own. You need someone on your side."

— Ben Rae, ARNP, SPMHNP Ideal Option Director of Provider Relations

Unloading the “Toxic People”

Finding a cheerleader is key, but it's equally important to cast off the folks who aren't on your side, including your dealer and friends and family members who use.

“It's important to set boundaries between you and the toxic people in your life,” says Ben Rae. “Otherwise, you could jeopardize all the incredible work you're doing.”

Keep in mind that some folks, feeling envious or threatened by your motivation, may try to sabotage your recovery with offers to “hang out just this once.”

So, be prepared to change your phone number, remove your phone contacts, delete your social media account, crash with an aunt who lives 50 miles away.

You may even need to get a restraining order, move to a new town, or tell your sister: “I love you as a sister, but you are not good for my life right now.”

Amber, 38, found support in a social media group; at the same time, she cut ties with everyone she'd associated with while using — even her father, who was mired in his own addiction. “He was angry at me for getting sober and dragging me down,” she says.

Mary, another Ideal Option patient, got sober with her husband. “We moved to a different city, changed our phone numbers, and made new friends,” she says. “You just can't hang around the same people anymore.”

If you don't cut ties completely, you're likely to get sucked back in quickly.

Shante thought she was stable in recovery until she went home to New Orleans to visit family. Within a day of reconnecting with old friends, she was shooting heroin.

“As soon as it happened, I knew that's not what I wanted,” recalls Shante. “I knew I had to literally leave town. Now I know I don't need to be Facebook friends with those people or have any connection. Period.”

“Show me your friends, and I will show you your future.”

-Larry Nye, PA-C Ideal Option Senior Director of Education and Research

Tera's Story

“Now that I'm sober, I realize they weren't my friends.”

It wasn't until she joined a fellowship academy in prison that Tera understood the importance of separating herself from the people she'd used drugs with.

“I learned what boundaries are and how you have to protect yourself from what's not good for you,” says Tera. That included her so-called “friends.”

“When you're high, you think, They're such great people. Now that I'm sober, I realize they weren't my friends. When I was in prison, not one of them called me or gave a crap. That was painful to learn.”

Upon her release, Tera regained custody of her son and daughter and steers clear of everyone she used with.

“My kids are my priority,” she says. “I make them breakfast. I drive them to school. I help them with their homework. They help me around the house. We're always busy, and we do everything together. They're by my side.”



PHASE 4

*Finding Your
Groove*

Stable on Suboxone and supported by positive people, you can shift focus to your next goal: developing the routines and healthy behavior patterns that will become automatic and anchor your recovery.

Opioids rewire your brain chemistry so that you believe using drugs is all that matters. While Suboxone is crucial to reversing this process, establishing new routines is hugely helpful as well.

"That's what true recovery is," says Larry Nye. "Taking the medication and avoiding withdrawal is just the beginning. It's really about new behavior patterns."

In this phase, you work on filling each day and encountering each stressful situation in a healthy way. Soon enough, it all becomes second nature.

"For so long, your reward system revolved around the use of substances, but there are a lot of other reward systems we can tap into that your brain and body might have forgotten about," says Ben Rae.

Establishing a Daily Routine

Even if you feel you've burned all your bridges, a daily routine not only helps rewire your brain but also staves off boredom.

"Boredom was my worst enemy," says Shante, who, early in her recovery, kept busy with support groups and a job at an agency that served pregnant women in need. "My job helped me have a steady pace."

Eventually Shante earned a college degree and began a career as

an addiction counselor, but in the early months, she kept her goals more modest and immediate, gaining confidence each day.

"When you use drugs, your self-esteem takes a big hit," says Ben Rae. "A daily routine helps create small wins. Even taking your dog out for a 20-minute walk can translate into feeling better about yourself. You're activating a positive change in your life."

What if you have no idea how to fill your time? Ask yourself what activities you enjoyed before your addiction. What made you happy back then? Did you enjoy listening to music? Gardening? Drawing? Hiking? Cooking?

This is a time to try different activities and see what sticks. "You have this opportunity to focus on healing, and walk away from previous patterns that are destructive," says Ben.

Geno's Story

Fresh out of inpatient treatment — and before living in a tent on the streets, always high on painkillers — Geno found himself restless in his new apartment. He asked his counselor, "What should I do to keep my mind occupied? Should I isolate myself or get bored?"

She told him: set a daily routine. He took the advice to heart.

"I wake up at about 6:45, take my Suboxone, and clean my entire house — I vacuum and everything, even if it's entirely clean. Then I hit the gym for one or two hours. Then I go to school from 10:15 to 1:15."

Three days a week, he picks up his kids and takes them to the park before cooking dinner.

He also goes on afternoon walks. "I put my cat in a cat backpack, and we go to the store and everywhere."

The walks and the weightlifting not only keep him busy but help with relieving stress. He finds comfort, too, in cleaning his house.

"If you had a rough day and feel you haven't accomplished anything, at least your bed was made and you have a clean house. You can appreciate that."

"I clean my house every day, even if it's already clean."



Coping with Stress

At this point in your recovery, you have several buffers against return to use: Suboxone, a supporter or two, a daily routine. You can strengthen your armor further by adopting new ways to cope with stress.

"You learn how to hold yourself accountable for problems rather than reacting to them as a victim," says Larry Nye, "So, you don't say, 'This happened, so I used drugs again.'"

Rich used to shoot heroin when he got stressed; now he relies on breathing exercises he learned in counseling. He focuses on inhaling deeply through his nose, and exhaling out his mouth.

"I do it for a few minutes until I can slow my heart rate down and get the jitters off. Sometimes, you've literally got to take a breather."

He finds the technique especially useful when his son and daughter, both under age 4, are screaming at the same time. "I say, 'Hey, guys, I need a minute. Daddy needs to settle down.' I might take a 10 second breather and walk away."

Some people meditate. Others exercise. Early in her recovery, Amber discovered journaling was a valuable way to relieve her stress.

"I had been numb for so long that I didn't know how to handle all these new emotions," she recalls. "By journaling, I wasn't holding everything in and exploding. If someone cut me off while I was driving or my teenagers were being mouthy, I'd stop what I was doing and let it out in writing."

Journaling not only helps you process difficult emotions but also has the practical effect of keeping your hands occupied. A jigsaw puzzle, a knitting project, yardwork, adult coloring books — these are helpful, too.

"Literally keeping your hands busy can go a long way in supporting a decrease in stress and anxiety," says Ben Rae.



"You have to do a lot of hard rewiring — to unlearn behaviors, thoughts, everything. Your emotional maturity level is so low. You have to dare to be vulnerable. If something difficult happens, you have to sit with your emotions and not be afraid of them."

-Mary PATIENT, IDEAL OPTION

PHASE 5

Repair and Rebuild

*“My kids and I have cried things out,
and we’re building our way back.
It’s such a privilege to be their mom.”*

-Morgan 36 PATIENT, IDEAL OPTION

Once you've settled into a healthy daily rhythm, you're ready to tackle the harder stuff, to examine how your life went awry, to forgive and love yourself, and to share your joy and regret with those you care most about.

This rewarding phase is all about rebuilding — both your self-esteem and your relationships.

"Your goal is to build up what you want for yourself, not what other people want," says Ben Rae. "Develop that self-love first."

For years, Heather had isolated herself, avoiding birthday parties and family dinners. She lost her home and car, landed in a homeless shelter with her kids; at night she'd sneak out to meet dealers.

Exhausted, she finally sought treatment at Ideal Option. Once she secured an apartment and a job, she was on a roll: "Providing a roof for my kids, knowing the bills would be paid — it was the best feeling in the world." Stability gave her the confidence to come clean to her family.

"When I finally did, the kids said they were proud of me," says Heather, 39. "They appreciated that I was being honest."

Amber made amends to her children, too. "I was brutally honest with them. They've seen my mug shot. I showed them the homeless people on the street and said, 'That's what I looked like.'"

During this phase, Amber made amends to others as well. "I'd run into someone and think, 'I probably owe them an apology.' Or, I'd see someone on Facebook and I'd write, 'I'm sorry. When I was using drugs, I was not a good person, and I apologize.'"

She could feel herself gaining momentum in recovery. "I started feeling like: If I can feel this good right now, I bet I can move on up and feel even better."

A few months into his recovery from heroin addiction, Robert, 38, got a job and took up weightlifting. Then, he began giving free haircuts to neighborhood kids and offering free car detailing.

"As soon as I felt better and was able to get out into the world, I was crying with joy," he says. "I wanted to pay it forward."

Freed from the stress of using heroin, Robert says, "Every day is like waking up in Beverly Hills in a mansion. You feel like life is going to be great. You think: Where am I going to go from here?"

Suzy's Story

"Before, I had repaired everything with lies."

For Suzy, reconnecting with her family seemed impossible. "I thought: I'm a big tangled ball of string. How will I ever undo this?" recalls Suzy, 47, an Ideal Option patient. "I just didn't know how to start. Before, I had repaired everything with lies."

Suzy had embezzled \$30,000 from her father, who suffered from dementia. She'd stolen her daughter's ATM card to buy drugs — while her daughter was in surgery, no less.

Suzy lost so much trust that when she told her family she had been diagnosed with breast cancer, they assumed she was lying.

"It wasn't until my daughter saw me bald with no breasts that she finally believed I really did have cancer."

But Suzy pressed on, mustering the courage to call a sister she hadn't seen in 30 years. "I had to get brutally honest with myself. I had to sit down and say: Look at the harm you've caused."

Her sister was willing to listen. "She said, 'You've owned all your mistakes.' And I really have."

Suzy started to forgive herself, too. "Before, I hated looking in the mirror. All the stealing and lying — it ate my soul away. But I finally realized: I was never a bad person trying to get good. I was a sick person trying to get well."



PHASE 6

Finding Your Purpose

In this phase, you've fully rejoined the world. Though you will always be "in recovery," your life no longer revolves around it. You're fully engaged in life and able to dream again.

What do I want from life? What is fulfilling to me?

Those are the questions you think about in this phase of recovery. Is your purpose to be a good parent? To have a full-time job? To further your education and help others in recovery?

What if you have no idea what you want to do with your life? That's OK! There's no hurry, and your options are wide open.

Larry Nye asks his patients: What did you want to be when you were a kid? If drugs hadn't been a thing in your life, what do you think you would have done?

"Some of your greatest gifts can come from your greatest hurts," says Larry. "Maybe your purpose is to help others, as a sponsor or as an addiction counselor. Healing often comes from helping others who have the same issue."

Kyle, a former car salesman, found his purpose in talking to school kids and other groups about addiction. "I want people to know this could happen to anyone," says Kyle, in recovery for 7 years.

In this phase, you pursue your own version of a happy life — whatever feels right to you.



"Many people are very content attending meetings, having a roof over their head and spending time with kids," says Ben Rae.

For Amber, having her kids back means everything. "I get to be Mom — to help them with homework and make their meals and do laundry. That's huge. If I can go from living on the streets to being a mom and owning a home and creating a garden, anyone can."

Geno has career ambitions. At 15, he dropped out of school, and at 18 went to prison for fraud. At 20, he was addicted to heroin and meth and living on the street. Now 24, he's on track to earn his GED and become a full-time college student. Eventually he wants to own a car detailing business.

"I think I could run a business really well," he says. "I like being around people and cars. I wasted a lot of years. I'm not going to waste any more."

"There's no more chaos in my life. I get to be with my family. I have my own home. It has electricity and doesn't smell dirty, and I can decorate it how I want. I have a regular life, and that's enough for me."

— Kayla 25, Ideal Option Patient

