

One More Tool for Early Recovery: Structure

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Severe substance use disorder (addiction) often entails a loss of daily structure and organization, leading to a chaotic and disorganized lifestyle. Work, personal, and family routines are usually neglected, and eating and sleeping patterns deviate from the culturally established norms, further contributing to the sense of chaos.

Those seeking recovery often avail themselves of the numerous benefits of inpatient treatment to accomplish their goals. One such advantage is the structured environment provided by the program, including a controlled wake-up time, scheduled meals, and adherence to rules and treatment expectations.

Patients must adhere to the structure, maintain a scheduled routine, attend sessions, and focus on recovery. However, upon leaving the safety of inpatient treatment, individuals must establish a structure for themselves. Tightly scheduling one's day can help reduce obsessive thoughts about drinking or using substances and alleviate boredom. Focus on obtaining and using drugs characterizes a routine in active addiction. A structural void is created in early recovery without the routine of seeking and using drugs.

Individuals in early recovery must create new recovery routines that support their abstinence and sobriety. This replacement of routines is essential for fostering a lifestyle conducive to recovery rather than addiction. Replacement may entail a complete overhaul and restructuring of one's time, activities, and focus.

Developing a recovery-oriented lifestyle can be facilitated by using organizational tools such as a day planner or appointment book to

schedule activities that support recovery. This may include counseling sessions, meetings with sponsors, personal and family events, and self-care activities like exercise and meditation.

Maintaining a tightly scheduled day in early recovery can significantly reduce the risk of relapse by eliminating excessive free time that may trigger cravings or negative thoughts. It also helps combat boredom, depression, and anxiety by keeping individuals occupied and preventing rumination.

In the absence of structure and meaningful recovery activities, many people who don't know what to do with their time, attention, and energy will take up other mood-altering activities like gaming, Facebook, or other time-sinks. These other potentially compulsive behaviors can quickly become a source of emotional conflict with family members hoping to see a renewal of commitment to productive activities. See the [Process Addictions](#) page.

Additional benefits of a structured schedule include help in prioritizing tasks and activities and preventing individuals from feeling overwhelmed or pulled in too many directions. Learning to say "no" to requests for time and setting appropriate boundaries is crucial in early recovery, as it fosters positive self-esteem and confidence.

Balancing conflicting demands for time and attention is a skill individuals in early recovery must learn through self-awareness and practice. It is essential to schedule time for self-reflection, leisure and relaxation, and alone time. Ineffective stress management, whether exacerbated by an overly structured or chaotic schedule, can increase the risk of relapse if left unaddressed. Staying busy with activities that support your recovery and keep your mind and body occupied is essential in early abstinence. **Note:** This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2009 on this site. The content has been updated for contemporary language, clarity and accuracy.

Please check out my Ebooks and Brief Lessons at

WWW.PEGGYFERGUSON.COM/MYSTORE

