the impact of wellness on recovery

Wellness matters. It can have a profound effect on people in recovery in terms of successful [recovery](https://facesandvoicesofrecovery.org/resources/mutual-aid-resources/) outcomes and overall physical health and well-being. Overall health is especially crucial for people in recovery because [research](https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/2071/fca1ce0ba6f77fe8ee3065406f1d113bbea2.pdf) shows that individuals with substance use disorders die years earlier than those without these disorders.

A [study](https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/2071/fca1ce0ba6f77fe8ee3065406f1d113bbea2.pdf) by the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors showed that those with substance use disorder might face heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure and cholesterol.

When we talk about wellness, we’re referring to both physical and mental health — both are equally important. But just what does wellness mean?

what is wellness?

In the context of recovery from substance use disorder, wellness means good health: physical, emotional and mental, social, and intellectual. Our sense of purpose, our experience of joy, and our relationships all play a vital part in our overall well-being just as much as our physical health outcomes.

Maintaining overall wellness in recovery, especially a sense of purpose and social relationships, are critical elements of maintaining long-term recovery. Exercise, for example, impacts the same reward centers of the brain as drugs and alcohol.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) [defines](https://store.samhsa.gov/system/files/sma16-4950.pdf) wellness as more than just the absence of disease or stress. SAMHSA says that there are eight dimensions of overall well-being:

1. **Emotional**: coping effectively with life and creating satisfying relationships
2. **Financial**: satisfaction with current and future financial circumstances
3. **Social**: developing a sense of connection, belonging, and a well-developed support system
4. **Spiritual**: expanding our sense of purpose and meaning in life
5. **Occupational**: a sense of satisfaction and enrichment achieved through our work
6. **Physical**: being physically active, sleeping well, and eating well
7. **Intellectual**: recognizing our abilities and expanding our skills, knowledge, and experience
8. **Environmental**: good health by being in pleasurable and stimulating environments that support our well-being.

One could argue that the first step in achieving wellness is recovering our physical health, which has been neglected after years of substance use.

how do you achieve wellness in substance use disorder recovery?

Substance use disorder takes its toll on your health. Years of drug and alcohol use cause a huge strain on our bodies as they try to process the toxins we put into ourselves, heal from wounds, and regain our strength. The process of detox can also be physically grueling too.

It can take months, if not years, for our bodies to recover from neglect and damage from drugs and alcohol having left our bodies depleted of essential vitamins and minerals. Our brains can take years to recover too, as we have damaged the reward pathways; this can lead to the desire to seek reward in other ways — with food, gambling, or sex — which has the potential to not only cause further damage but also could lead us back to drug and alcohol use.

Therefore, it’s essential that any approach to recovery includes activities that promote physical and mental wellness. This can be achieved in a number of ways:

* **Movement**: Exercising is a great way to boost your mood with the brain’s feel-good chemicals, improve cardiovascular health and fitness, improve sleep, reduce stress, and positively impact food choices. Boosting your brain chemistry through exercise can help rewire the brain and maintain recovery goals. *Tip:*Find an activity you enjoy! If you don’t want to join a gym, don’t — you could join a walking group, try a spin class, or try learning a martial art.
* **Eat well**: Nutrient-dense foods are a great way to replenish vitamins and minerals and create energy naturally. A balanced diet that incorporates slow-releasing carbohydrates (sweet potatoes, brown rice, and other whole grains), protein (fish, meat, tofu, chicken, seafood, cottage cheese), and fruits and vegetables is achievable for most people on a range of budgets. *Tip:*Healthy food doesn’t have to be bland and boring. Try new recipes and experiment with different spices, rubs, and sauces. Eating well doesn’t have to be financially prohibitive either: most fruits and vegetables are cheaper if bought frozen or canned, and are just as nutritionally dense.
* **Mindfulness**: A practice like meditation, yoga, tai chi, or qigong is a great way to achieve a state of relaxation and centeredness that can help with overall well-being. When we are mindful, we make better choices and are more likely to honor our bodies and health goals. *Tip:* You don’t have to immediately jump right in and meditate for 30 minutes. Try sitting for five minutes, checking out a guided body scan meditation before going to bed, or doing a short yoga class on YouTube.