

## Blog Post

### Seven Themes to Watch in Recovery Science: Insights from the Inaugural National Conference on Addiction Recovery Science

The first National Conference on Addiction Recovery Science (NCARS) made clear that what we know about recovery is rapidly evolving—from a narrow focus on abstinence to a broader understanding that includes mental health, social connections, and overall quality of life. This exploration, also known as the science of recovery, is a relatively new endeavor that seeks to understand not just *if* recovery happens, but *how* it happens and *what* factors support it.

The conference organizer, the [Consortium on Addiction Recovery Science](#), and the National Institutes of Health Helping to End Addiction Long-term® Initiative, or [NIH HEAL Initiative®](#) stand together at the forefront of the movement to advance the science of recovery through research and community partnership. As we look ahead to the [second conference in April 2025](#), several key themes are emerging that provide a roadmap for where the field is heading. Here's a closer look at the top trends to watch over the coming year.

#### 1. Expanding Definitions and Measurements of Recovery

Traditional definitions of recovery have long centered on abstinence from substances. However, new research suggests that recovery is a multifaceted process that includes improved mental health, quality of life, and social functioning. Innovative measurement tools, such as the [Recovery from Addiction and Resilience \(R2AR\) Assessment](#) tool, were designed to capture the complex and multifaceted nature of recovery beyond just abstinence. Unlike traditional assessments, which often focus solely on the absence of substance use, the R2AR evaluates a broad range of recovery indicators, such as psychological wellbeing, social connectedness, and participation in meaningful activities. This approach enables researchers and clinicians to tailor recovery support services to individual needs, enhancing long-term outcomes.

“When I only focused on not using the drug, I could not stay abstinent for very long,” said Kimberly Moore, a person with lived experience of opioid use disorder who attended the NCARS conference in 2024. “I had to not just stop using, but also focus on why I got high in the first place. Once I made that connection, I was able to celebrate more than 23 years clean and counting.”

#### 2. Novel Recovery Pathways and Phenotypes: Personalized Approaches to Recovery

The NCARS meeting underscored the importance of identifying unique recovery pathways and attributes (or phenotypes), recognizing that everyone's recovery journey is unique. For example, [one study](#) focused on two key factors: abstinence self-efficacy and delay discounting.

The first measures a person’s confidence in their ability to resist substance use in difficult situations, while the latter refers to how strongly someone values immediate rewards over long-term benefits. The research found that individuals who showed a stronger preference for immediate rewards had lower confidence in staying abstinent. In the future, these individuals may benefit from tailored interventions that focus on enhancing decision-making skills and building strategies to handle high-risk scenarios like stress or cravings.

### **3. Strategies for Workforce Integration of People in Recovery**

Supporting individuals in recovery often involves not just providing clinical and therapeutic support, but also helping them reintegrate into the workforce. Multiple NCARS sessions on workforce integration highlighted that employment is both a key outcome and facilitator of recovery. One lauded strategy was the integration of peer support services into workforce reintegration programs. Peer support specialists often serve as mentors, advocates, and sources of encouragement, providing emotional support, practical guidance, and help in connecting individuals to recovery resources.

However, despite the demonstrated impact of peer support services, significant policy and funding challenges hinder the full potential of these programs. Be on the lookout for more discussion of solutions to this challenge at the 2025 NCARS meeting.

### **4. Learnings from Harm Reduction and Recovery Efforts: A Complementary Approach**

Harm reduction strategies, such as syringe services programs, are increasingly recognized as integral components of recovery support. Qualitative findings from a survey of harm reduction consumers in Tennessee shared at NCARS 2024 showed that participants viewed these services as essential, particularly for overdose prevention and reducing the harms associated with substance use. Many participants felt comfortable accessing these programs and emphasized the need for increased availability and support. However, the survey also found that concerns about stigma and law enforcement interactions remain barriers for some people seeking these services. Addressing these barriers will be an important topic in years to come.

“As a recipient of harm reduction services when I was an injection heroin and cocaine user, I know firsthand the value of feeling seen and cared for,” said Meghann Perry, a person with lived experience of opioid use disorder who attended the NCARS conference in 2024. “Harm reduction fills a critical gap in our services by providing the belonging and safety that people who use substances problematically desperately need to make a commitment to positive change.”

### **5. The Current State of Recovery Support Services: Addressing Gaps and Building Capacity**

Access to comprehensive recovery support services—such as stable housing, employment opportunities, and social services—remains a significant barrier for many individuals in recovery. Presenters at the 2024 NCARS meeting highlighted that stigma within healthcare

settings often discourages people from seeking necessary support, while insufficient funding for long-term programs limits the availability of sustained assistance. Efforts are underway to expand culturally tailored services to better support marginalized communities and reduce disparities in outcomes. However, overcoming these challenges will require collaboration among researchers, policymakers, and community organizations. Discussions on how to create a more inclusive and accessible recovery ecosystem are expected to be a central focus at next year's conference.

### **6. The Intersection of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion (DEI), Health Disparities, and Recovery: Promoting Equity in Recovery Outcomes**

Research has revealed that marginalized communities, including racial and ethnic minoritized groups, face significant barriers to accessing recovery services. For example, Black individuals with opioid use disorder are less likely to receive medications for opioid addiction compared to their White counterparts, leading to poorer recovery outcomes. Efforts to promote health equity in recovery include culturally adapted recovery programs and targeted outreach to underserved populations. One program highlighted during the 2024 NCARS meeting—a peer recovery support initiative in a predominantly Latinx community—reported a 60% increase in engagement with recovery services over two years, demonstrating the potential of culturally tailored interventions to bridge gaps in care.

“When recovery isn't accessible to everyone, we reinforce the same disparities that lead to substance use disorders in the first place,” said Arielle Estes, a person with lived experience of opioid use disorder who attended the NCARS conference in 2024. “Addressing the intersection of DEI, health disparities, and recovery is not just about fairness; it's about survival for many people in underserved communities.”

### **7. Youth and Families: Addressing the Unique Needs of Emerging Adults in Recovery**

Research presented throughout the 2024 conference highlighted the unique developmental challenges faced by emerging adults, including high rates of co-occurring mental health disorders and increased vulnerability to relapse. Two efforts to address these challenges are the [Collaborative Hub for Emerging Adult Recovery Research](#) (CHEARR) and the [Family Involvement in Recovery Support and Treatment](#) (FIRST) networks, which are cross-organizational, boundary-breaking collaborations geared toward improving outcomes for young adults in treatment for OUD. Each funded by nearly \$2 million grants from the NIH HEAL Initiative, CHEARR and FIRST are filling a gap in existing opioid recovery research by focusing on the efficacy of specific support services for young adults. Looking ahead, researchers will use these insights to develop a new set of standards for young adult recovery programs—and this is sure to be a major focus at next year's NCARS.

### **Looking Ahead: Preparing for the 2025 NCARS**

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The [second National Conference on Addiction Recovery Science](#) will be held virtually on April 23-24, 2025. With a continued focus on the science of recovery, the event will once again bring together researchers and community members to explore these key themes and develop new strategies to advance the field. Make your plans now to attend!

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