

Understanding the Stages of Recovery for Caregivers with Co-Occurring Disorders in Child Welfare



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We all struggle to make changes in our lives, for example, developing healthier eating habits or switching up our daily routine. Even when we succeed at making a change, it rarely happens all at once. Instead, the process of change tends to be gradual, sometimes taking years or even decades to fully achieve. Making the changes needed to recover from substance use disorder and mental illness are similarly challenging. From an outsider's perspective, the change process can seem at times to be happening too slowly or not at all, but rarely is this the case! In these moments of frustration, it's helpful for us as providers to look a little more closely at what's happening with the caregivers we work with and consider where they are in their recovery journey.

We often hear the saying that practitioners and CSP workers should "start where the client is." But what does that really mean? It means we need to identify where a person is with their motivation for change, meeting them at that stage of their journey and using our skills and strategies to help them move forward. The Stages of Change model outlines stages, giving us a map of how to tell where a person is in their journey of making a change¹. Each stage of change has a corresponding stage of

treatment. Paying attention to which stage of change a caregiver is in for their mental illness or substance use disorder can help their counselor "meet them where they are at" and choose the most effective intervention for them². This framework for matching the right type of intervention with a person's stage of change has been shown to be effective at supporting the change process for a variety of different lifestyle changes, including changes in substance use³.

While the stages of change and treatment models give us a guide for what to do with a caregiver who is in the process of making a change, they don't give us any insight into how a caregiver experiences this process. The Stages of Recovery model was created to help providers better understand a person's own perspective through the process of recovering from a substance use disorder and mental illness⁴. When working with a caregiver with co-occurring disorders, it can be helpful to think about what this caregiver is likely thinking and feeling about their own recovery experience based on the stage of recovery they're in. This allows us to empathize with and respond more effectively to the caregivers we work with.

PRACTICE TIP 5: Understanding the Stages of Recovery for Caregivers with Co-Occurring Disorders in Child Welfare

Stage of Recovery	Stage of Change	Stage of Treatment
Overwhelmed / Despair	Precontemplation	Engagement
Glimpsing Hope / Awareness Grows	Contemplation	Persuasion
Turning Points / Determination	Preparation	Planning
Living with Illness / Rebuild	Action	Active Treatment
Growth and Living Beyond the Illness	Maintenance	Relapse Prevention

The example below gives us a glimpse into what the stages of recovery might look like for caregivers we work with, how their substance use and mental health counselors may choose to intervene based on the stages of change and treatment, and how child protection workers can effectively respond to and support a caregiver in each of these stages:

Stage of recovery | Stage of change | Stage of treatment
Overwhelmed / Despair > Precontemplation > Engagement

Andy became involved with child protection after his opioid problem became a barrier to taking care of his kids. He currently meets diagnostic criteria for major depression and substance use disorder and is having difficulty seeing any future for himself. Andy believes he can control his substance use as needed and that his child protection worker is just out to get him. He's angry that the courts are monitoring his use and devastated that he can't parent his children. It's clear that Andy is overwhelmed by his addiction, which he copes with by denying he has a problem, and the despair he feels triggers feelings of anger toward his situation.

Andy's counselor recognizes that Andy doesn't see his opioid use or depression as a problem at this point, which is normal for the precontemplation stage of change. Because any attempt to try and point out the problems of Andy's substance use and mental health at this stage could push Andy away and decrease his participation in treatment, At this point in care, Andy's counselor needs to focus on getting to know Andy and building Andy's trust in her. In her progress report to child protection, she writes that Andy is attending treatment regularly and she is working with Andy on engagement strategies.

Guillermo, Andy's child protection worker, knows that Andy really cares about his kids. He recognizes that Andy is likely feeling overwhelmed and despair regarding his mental health and addiction, and that these feelings are manifesting as denial about how much these things are impacting his family, and anger toward child protection. Guillermo understands that the first step will be getting to a place where Andy can consider that Guillermo does really care about him and his family, and wants the best outcomes for them. Guillermo is careful to avoid taking Andy's anger toward him personally, avoid trying to convince Andy of how much he cares through words, and avoid bringing the "strong arm of the law" down on Andy in their meetings. Instead, Guillermo focuses on conveying that he cares through exploring

what really matters to Andy, building Andy's sense of hope and empowerment, and offering support and encouragement in any area Andy is interested in changing, even if it's not something directly related to what's on Andy's case plan.

Guillermo: "What's going on with you today?"

Andy: "Life is so hard and probably won't ever get better for me. But, you shouldn't be here, my using isn't a problem."

Guillermo: "You're feeling pretty low right now and like nothing's going to change... but I wonder... imagine your day tomorrow is even just a little better than today. I'm wondering what that would look like for you?"

Andy: "Tomorrow? Well, I've been wanting to start a garden for my kids... I think if I could do that, that would be an ok day."

Guillermo: "Gardening sounds fun, and soothing too. That's a great dad move, I bet your kids would really love that. What would it take for you to get a garden up and running? Is there any way I can help?"

Andy: "Well, I have to get some seeds, and a place to plant them. Getting seeds would be easy, that would probably be where I'd start. If you have any ideas about where I could get a garden plot for free or at very little cost, I suppose that could be helpful..."

Stage of Change | Stage of Treatment | Stage of Recovery
Contemplation and Preparation > Persuasion and Planning
> Glimpsing Hope / Awareness Grows and Turning Points / Determination

Andy has planted a small vegetable patch with his kids at a nearby community garden, and has been attending his court ordered individual and group counseling sessions. At the group counseling sessions, Andy hears stories from others who overcame their substance use disorder to achieve the life they wanted for themselves. Andy finds these stories to be inspiring and sometimes thinks about how he might be able to overcome his own addiction, like he was able to finally start a garden for his kids. He starts thinking about what it might take for him to get there. He's still skeptical about child protection but wonders if

A caregiver's substance use or mental health counselor can be a great resource for child protection workers. It may be helpful to collaborate with a caregiver's counselor, asking them for information about where a caregiver is at in their process of change and treatment, and for suggestions for how you as a child protection worker can best support the caregiver in this stage of their change process. Some recommended questions to ask a caregiver's counselor include:

- How is this caregiver engaged in recovery?
- How is this caregiver engaging in the treatment process?
- What is this caregiver working on?
- Where has this caregiver made progress?
- What can I do to support this caregiver's recovery, given the stage they're in right now?

talking to Guillermo about this might be helpful, like it was helpful to talk to him about his dreams for a garden. It's clear that Andy is beginning to see hope in a better future and is at a turning point in his understanding of his opioid use and depression.

In his counseling sessions, Andy is starting to bring up how his substance use and mental illness have been getting in the way of things like being able to leave the apartment to get groceries. His counselor recognizes this is a sign that Andy is contemplating making a change (contemplation stage), and that he may be more open now to having conversations about how his substance use and mental illness create barriers for him. He shifts his focus toward exploring Andy's reasons for wanting to change to resolve the fears he has about changing, and to get Andy to commit to making plans to work on the change. Once Andy moves into the planning stage of change, indicating that he intends to change but is trying to work out how, he will focus on supporting Andy in setting goals and breaking them down into manageable steps. In his progress report to child protection, he writes that Andy is exploring reasons and steps to take for changing his substance use, and that she is using motivational strategies in her work with Andy.

Guillermo recognizes that Andy sees some possibility and desire for change but isn't quite sure yet if he wants to or can do it. Guillermo notices Andy is a bit more open with him now and he still needs to follow Andy's lead to continue building trust and supporting Andy's own process of change. He avoids giving Andy advice or his own observations for how Andy's substance use and mental illness have been harmful to him and his kids. Instead, he engages Andy in talking about his pros and cons to support the work Andy is doing to resolve the fears he has about changing, as well as to reinforce Andy to commit to making plans to work on the change.

Guillermo: "Tell me about some of the positive and not so helpful things about using?"

Andy: "Using helps me unwind at the end of the day. I used to like going out with my friends, but they won't go out with me anymore and I am really sad about that. Last time I tried to stop using, I started to feel really sick and shaky."

Guillermo: "So you feel relaxed while using, but afterwards you feel sad and sometimes sick."

Andy: "Yeah. I miss my friends. I just don't know how to stop, I don't know if I can do it."

Guillermo: "So you want some things in your life to change, but you're afraid you can't do it."

Stage of Change | Stage of Treatment | Stage of Recovery
Action > Active Treatment > Living with Illness / Rebuild

Andy believes now that he can manage his substance use disorder through abstinence and understands that the doubt and challenges he's experiencing are normal for someone with depression and substance use like himself. He is taking an antidepressant and reducing his drug use but doesn't yet feel stable. Andy is beginning to rebuild his life.

Andy's counselor recognizes that since Andy is in the action stage of change, he should shift his focus to providing support, education, and suggestions for how he can manage his substance use and depression. In his progress report to CPS, he writes that Andy is taking active steps toward managing his substance use, and he is engaging him in psychoeducation and skills practice.

Guillermo recognizes that Andy now feels motivated and empowered to take steps toward changing his substance use, but that it will still take time to solidify this change. Guillermo focuses on providing support and encouragement to help Andy stay on track.

Guillermo: "How have things been going since the last time we talked?"

Andy: "Things are a little better. I only used twice last week, but sometimes the cravings are really bad and I struggle to get through the day."

Guillermo: "You have done such great work so far; I hope you are proud of yourself! It'll take some more time to get to where you want to be and that's ok. Is your struggling with the really bad cravings something you think you'd like to bring up to your counselor next time you see her?"

Andy: "Yeah, that's a good idea! I'll ask her for her suggestions about what to do on those days when coping strategies don't work as well to beat the cravings."

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Stage of Change | Stage of Treatment | Stage of Recovery

Maintenance > Relapse Prevention >
Growth and Living Beyond the Illness

Andy has decided to stop using because he realized it increased his feelings of anxiety and sadness. He successfully met his CPS case plan and is getting ready to close services. Now that he feels like he's overcome his addiction and is providing the level of stability he wants to for his kids, he's started thinking about what else he wants in life. He's become more involved with his gardening, and has even started going to a family gardening class with his kids. It's clear how much Andy has grown and sees a vision for his future that goes beyond managing his substance use and mental illness.

Recognizing that Andy is in the maintenance stage of change, his counselor focuses on supporting Andy with enhancing his recovery and preventing relapse to help him deal with any challenges to his recovery that may come up in the future. In her progress report to CPS, she writes that Andy has successfully maintained sobriety and she is engaging Andy in relapse prevention planning.

As they are getting ready to close services, Guillermo considers how Andy must be feeling excited to achieve the vision he has for his life. Guillermo focuses on reinforcing Andy's sense of accomplishment in his recovery, as well as the connections Andy has made that he can rely on for help in the future when needed.

Guillermo: "You've done a great job getting to this place of recovery! As we're getting ready to close services..."

who can continue to support your changes and help you to prevent relapse?"

Andy: "Yeah, things have been going really well for me. I'm lucky to have a great counselor who helps me a lot, I plan to keep going to see her each week. I've gotten to know a couple people from my weekly group pretty well too, and I enjoy meeting up with them for some sober fun each week. Every now and then when I'm having a really hard night, I know I can call one of them to talk me through it... they really get it."

Guillermo: "That's great to hear. I'm really excited for you and your kids moving forward."

Conclusion

One of the most common reasons for children entering the child welfare system in the United States is caregiver substance abuse⁵. Therefore, a key challenge for many child protection workers is understanding how to best support a caregiver's recovery in these circumstances⁶. Although the example provided shows Andy's progression through the stages of change and recovery as a straightforward process, it's important to note that change, treatment, and personal recovery are not linear. They fluctuate throughout a person's life, and it's normal for the people we work with to bounce around between the stages: skipping stages, being in multiple stages at once, or going back to an earlier stage before or after solidifying changes in their life. When child protection workers can spot, understand, and respond effectively to these stages; we can better support caregivers in their recovery and the families we work with.

A note about recovery and BIPOC

Research into stages of recovery is ongoing and our understanding of change and recovery based on the literature will continue to transform over time. Researchers to date have done some initial work to explore similarities and differences between the perspectives of White people with perspectives on recovery from Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)⁷ and found that recovery often contains the same themes, but there are fine grained details that contain different emphases among BIPOC individuals. More research is needed to better understand these areas of emphasis.

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