Recovery from heroin dependence & the desire to be normal

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Defining recovery

• “Recovery from substance dependence is a voluntarily maintained lifestyle characterized by sobriety, personal health, & citizenship.” (Betty Ford Institute, 2007)

• “The process of recovery from problematic substance use is characterised by voluntarily-sustained control over substance use which maximises health & wellbeing & participation in the rights, roles & responsibilities of society.” (UK Drug Policy Commission, 2008)

• Recovery is about “improving quality of life in a sustainable way & supporting those who aspire to be in recovery to make changes & move forward.” (Best et al., 2009)
Conceptualisations of recovery

- A process or an event/endpoint
- Abstinence or harm reduction
- Pathology or wellness
- From spoiled identity to normality
Qualitative study of recovery

Data presented are part of a larger qualitative study of the everyday lives of recovering heroin users:

- 40 in-depth interviews (21 males & 19 females; ages 24-50 years)
  - 10 x heroin users starting OST
  - 10 x heroin users beginning a detox
  - 10 x heroin users entering rehab
  - 10 x ex-heroin users (no opioids for 2-36 months)
Recovery & becoming normal

“I want to live a so-called normal life, whatever ‘normal’ may be.”
(Male, 48 years, ex-user)


• What is normal?
Coding & analysing the normality data
1. Material possessions

“I was just wanting that perfect little life…the car, the little house…wanting what ‘normal’ people have.” (Female, 28 years, detoxer)

“I want a mortgage, want a nice little house…just a little house in suburbia… with little drive, car on the drive, little cul de sac…some ivy climbing up the walls.” (Male, 25 years, ex user)

“Not having to worry about where I’m going to be tonight, because even though I’m in here [nightshelter], it doesn’t mean I’m secure…I don’t know, being able to put a kettle on when I want… be able to watch telly.” (Female, 35 years, detoxer)
2. Relationships

“I wish I could find somebody to be happy ever after.” (Female, 49 years, substitution treatment)

“I want…2.4 children, nice house, nice wife to come home to…ideally, in an ideal world, but I don’t really think I’m gonna get that.” (Male, 35 years, rehabilitation service)

“I’ve got to make friends … I just want to get the first couple of weeks out of the way [in residential detox unit] and after that learn to live a normal life again.” (Male, 37 years, detoxer)

“We go around a friend’s house, have a meal, go to the pictures, sometimes we just stay at home, but that’s OK. I suppose really I’d always sort of craved this normal life, and sometimes if I am home and I think, ‘This is really boring and shit’, I think, ‘No, hold on. This is normal life’…I lived in the fast lane for too long so I have to appreciate moments of down time and just appreciate that I can do that, even if it is a bit boring.” (Female, 45 years, ex user)
3. Everyday activities

“[I] went to Tesco, did my shopping, fruit & veg shopping, toiletries & stuff. So my routine at the moment is pretty normal, average for a normal human being.” (Male, 34 years, detoxer)

“I’m happy to sit down & watch telly, where before I wouldn’t have been able to sit there, especially if I was clucking [withdrawing].” (Male, 38 years, substitution treatment)

“The norm is, I suppose, getting up in the morning, going to work, you know.” (Male, 37 years, substitution treatment)

“I think I thrive on chaos. When I start doing normal stuff, I fear the normality.” (Male, 35 years, rehabilitation service)
4. Experiencing emotions

“Your emotions genuinely come back when you’re detoxing…You get the giggles, & it’s just basically where your emotions are coming back…One minute you don’t know whether to laugh or cry.” (Female, 33 years, ex-user)

“A couple of times a song has come on that’s got memories attached. I’ve been emotional…which again is novel…I’m alright about it at the minute; it’s nothing overwhelming. I think it’s just normality…but new to me.” (Male, 35 years, detoxing)

“It’s just normal, isn’t it? You have good & bad days when you’re using; you have good & bad days when you’re straight as well. So it’s just life.” (Female, 26 years, ex-user)
5. Body functioning

“You wake up & you feel OK. You don’t have to then go & drink something or smoke something or inject something, just to feel like normal. So that’s kind of what I want to get back…Just to wake up feeling normal would be great really…a normal kind of nervous system, normal pain receptors.” (Male, 28 years, detoxer)

“Like periods & that, you don’t have them when you use too much gear [heroin]. And all that has come back now…Everything seems to be getting back to normal.” (Female, 29 years, substitution treatment)

“I get them [colds and sniffles], not any more or any less than anybody else. I just get them. I get a cold when the winter hits. I get a cold when the summer hits... I don’t think about it, it’s just normal.” (Male, 25 years, ex user)
6. Drug use

“It [heroin] just keeps me normal now. It kind of makes me numb.” (Female, 37 years, substitution treatment)

“Just normal, everyday life, you know. Just a lot of people will smoke a few joints every now & again, have a few beers, & that’s enough. No more than that, no less than that though either really. I don’t want to be squeaky clean. I don’t see the need to be. Just keep it under control.” (Male, 31 years, residential rehab)

“Doing the drugs, I just don’t want that life any more - having to get money all the time, just sitting there wasting your day away. I want to…have a normal life.” (Female, 29 years, substitution treatment)
## Discourses of normality

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Conclusions

• ‘Wanting to be normal’ is central to recovery narratives
• Normality is an extremely complex concept
• Heroin users use the term normality in sophisticated ways
• Understanding of normality varies between individuals
• Using the term normality uncritically isn’t particularly helpful in terms of understanding recovery
• Deconstructing what individual heroin users mean by normality can provide useful insights that will potentially inform recovery policy & practice
Implications

• Enabling individuals to behave, feel & appear normal (as they understand it) might facilitate more controlled drug use & even abstinence
• The prospect of a house, car, job & positive relationships might all help to motivate heroin users in recovery
• Individuals in recovery need dreams & aspirations, but they also need achievable goals
• Relatively cheap material possessions, meaningful employment, trusting relationships & routine everyday activities can potentially yield important recovery benefits
• Heroin users will often need assistance in learning how to do, be & feel normal
• Small bodily changes are rewarding & potentially valuable motivators of recovery
And recovery?

- Is more a process than an endpoint
- Encompasses both abstinence & harm reduction
- Should prioritise broader wellness goals, rather than narrow drug use goals
- Cannot be explained adequately by blanket statements about wanting to be normal
- Can be understood better by asking individuals what exactly they mean by wanting to be normal
- Is about “improving quality of life in a sustainable way & supporting those who aspire to be in recovery to make changes & move forward.” (Best et al., 2009)
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