

Recovery as Intentional Change



By Darcy B.

A practical framework for change

Over time, I've simplified my understanding of recovery to two essentials: abstinence and change. Abstinence is easy to define. It simply means not using. Change is less straightforward and can take many forms, depending on the framework you adopt.

In Alcoholics Anonymous, steps four through twelve are intended to provide a structured path for change. They can be effective, provided one accepts the underlying premise that lasting recovery depends on a power beyond the individual. While the language speaks explicitly of God or a higher power, the core idea is that the source of change lies outside oneself. I take a different view. I believe the capacity for recovery resides within each of us. The work is not to place that responsibility elsewhere, but to find it, strengthen it, and deliberately shape the internal changes that make long-term recovery possible.

The approach to change I've adopted comes from the business world. Over the course of my career, my role evolved from a primarily technical and engineering focus to one centered on leadership and change management. Even there, no single approach to change fits every situation. Different models have different strengths, and their usefulness depends on context.

The approach I lead with is built on simplicity and agility. It avoids unnecessary complexity and focuses on what actually drives movement. The goal is to provide clear direction, a roadmap that identifies where we are, where we are going, and how we will navigate the change between the two. At its core, it requires clarity on three things:

- Current state
- Desired future state
- Guiding principles

Current State

Like any journey, it is difficult, if not impossible, to choose a direction without knowing where you currently are.

In many recovery frameworks, particularly within Alcoholics Anonymous, Step Four is intended to establish a clear picture of one's current state. In practice, it is often approached as an exercise focused largely on shortcomings, mistakes, and past harms. That emphasis has never sat well with me.

I do not view my past as something to be reduced to a list of negatives. My experiences, my thinking, my actions, the lessons I learned and those I ignored all contributed to who I am today. They shaped how I see the world, how I respond to it, and how I arrived at this point.

I see my life as an ongoing story that I am actively creating. To do that honestly, I need to look at the past with curiosity and openness rather than judgment or shame. A complete story recognizes both weaknesses where improvement may be needed and strengths that can be leveraged. That honest and balanced examination is my starting point for change.

Desired Future State

In *Alice in Wonderland*, the Cheshire Cat says to Alice, "If you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there." This is where defining a desired future state comes into play.

Goals can be part of this, but I believe it is more important to have a vision for the future. Goals tend to be rigid. They can be useful for driving short-term change, but they often narrow focus. A vision is broader. It provides direction without prescribing every step.

With a vision, I get to paint a picture of the person I want to become. I think of it in simple terms: what do I want to be when I grow up?

Guiding Principles

While often confused with values, guiding principles serve a different purpose. Values describe what we care about. Guiding principles shape how we make decisions. They act as a set of rules we can return to when things become unclear or difficult.

The guiding principles I use are adapted from a framework originally designed to manage information technology. The seven ITIL guiding principles, when stripped of their technology and service management focus, are largely about continuous improvement, value-driven decisions, and adaptability. Many of these ideas align well with addiction recovery.

Each principle is listed first, followed by how I apply it in this context.

1. Focus on Value

Focus on what truly matters

In recovery, this means prioritizing health, relationships, and long-term well-being over short-term relief or gratification.

2. Start Where You Are

Accept your current reality

Recovery begins with an honest assessment of where you are today, without shame or self-deception.

3. Progress Iteratively with Feedback

Recovery happens step by step

Change doesn't occur all at once. It is built through small, deliberate actions and learning from what works and what doesn't.

4. Collaborate and Promote Visibility

Seek support and remain accountable

Recovery strengthens when it is not done in isolation. Honest conversations, shared experiences, and accountability matter.

5. Think and Work Holistically

Address the whole person

Addiction affects more than behavior. Mental, emotional, physical, and social health all matter and must be considered together.

6. Keep It Simple and Practical

Avoid unnecessary complexity

Recovery strategies should be realistic and sustainable. Complexity often creates excuses rather than progress.

7. Optimize and Automate

Build habits that support recovery

Over time, healthy routines reduce the need for constant effort. The goal is to make recovery the default, not a daily battle.

Agility

With a clear understanding of who we are now and who we want to become, we can begin to build a course of action, a roadmap. At this stage, it is less important to map the entire journey than it is to identify the first one or two steps.

As change begins, new experiences, ideas, and beliefs emerge. These can alter how we understand both ourselves and our vision for the future. A rigid plan assumes certainty. Agility assumes learning.

An agile approach focuses on action, reflection, and adjustment. We decide on a change and take the step. We pause to assess the outcome. Did it move us closer to where we want to be, take us further away, or simply shift us sideways? With that understanding, we decide on the next step and repeat the process, refining our direction as we go.

When decisions are unclear, guiding principles provide the anchor. They help keep us aligned with our desired future state, even as the route continues to evolve.

Bringing It Together

Recovery, as I understand it, is not a single decision or a fixed destination. It is an ongoing process grounded in abstinence and driven by intentional change. That change begins with an honest understanding of our current state, informed by a complete view of our past, neither reduced to shame nor romanticized.

From there, defining a desired future state provides direction. Not as a rigid set of goals, but as a vision of the person we are working toward becoming. That vision gives meaning to the work and helps ensure change is purposeful rather than reactive.

Agility is what connects the two. It allows us to move forward without pretending we have all the answers. We take a step, assess the outcome, learn, and adjust. Guiding principles keep us aligned when decisions are unclear and circumstances shift.

This approach does not promise certainty or perfection. It does, however, provide clarity, direction, and a way to move forward deliberately. For me, that has made all the difference.

Darcy attended his first AA meeting in 1989 and entered treatment in 1990. It would take another 21 years before he reached his final breaking point and it was in the summer of 2011 that he admitted he was an alcoholic and made sobriety his top priority.

Over time, he embraced his agnostic beliefs and developed a personal approach to recovery rooted in the idea that the strength to stay sober comes from within, while remaining connected to the AA and recovery community for support when needed.

Darcy is the father of three and a proud grandfather of four. He has a lifelong passion for music and spends much of his free time designing and building guitars.
