

Understanding Recovery Capital: A Holistic Framework for Sustaining Recovery

Recovery from substance use is often supported by multiple forms of care, connection, and resources, particularly during the early stages of initiating recovery. At the same time, recovery is more than the absence of substance use. It encompasses psychological well-being, physical health, social relationships, economic stability, purpose, and a sense of belonging. Focusing narrowly on abstinence or return to use overlooks the broader life circumstances that shape how recovery is experienced and sustained, and obscures the contextual factors that influence individual recovery trajectories.

Because recovery is a holistic and ongoing process that evolves over the life course, the types and intensity of support that are most helpful may shift over time. The collection of supports and resources that individuals can draw upon is commonly described as recovery capital, or “the quantity and quality of internal and external resources that one can bring to bear to initiate and sustain recovery from addiction.”¹ Recovery capital can grow or diminish as personal circumstances, social environments, and structural conditions change.

Understanding and measuring recovery capital is important because it is associated with increased stability and resilience in recovery and may help buffer against return to use. Although the likelihood of relapse generally declines as recovery duration increases, risk is not entirely eliminated, regardless of length of time in recovery.^{2,3} Attending to recovery capital provides a more nuanced and person-centered way to support long-term recovery, beyond binary indicators of use or non-use.



While it is broadly accepted that individuals with greater access to recovery capital are more likely to sustain recovery than those with less, recovery capital can look very different for everyone. Individuals may require different quantities or types of capital at different stages of their recovery journey. Recovery capital comes in four ‘flavors’, including social, economic, human, and cultural, which we describe on the next page.

Recovery capital refers to the dynamic collection of internal and external resources that individuals can draw upon to support their recovery. By measuring and documenting recovery capital in a collaborative, strengths-based way, recovery professionals can gain valuable insights into how supports, opportunities, and challenges shift across the recovery journey and how to adapt care, services, and environments to better support sustained recovery.

Economic Capital, also known as financial capital, comprises income, employment, savings, insurance, property, and other material resources that can be mobilized to meet basic needs and support stability.^{1,3} Differences in economic capital can shape the range of treatment options available to an individual, influence access to supportive services, affect housing stability, and create varying degrees of flexibility as individuals seek to make and sustain lifestyle changes.^{2,5} Limited economic resources may constrain an individual's post-treatment options (e.g., returning to a prior living environment may compromise recovery), whereas individuals with greater economic capital may have access to more treatment settings, recovery supports, or housing options following treatment, including the ability to relocate or modify their environment.^{2,5} Importantly, economic capital doesn't determine recovery outcomes, but it can meaningfully shape the opportunities and constraints individuals encounter along their recovery pathway.

Social Capital is the set of resources accessible to an individual through their social relationships and networks, including family, friends, peers, and community connections.^{2,3} Social capital matters in recovery because these relationships often provide access to tangible and intangible resources such as employment opportunities, housing assistance, mutual support, information, mentorship, and emotional support during transitions and periods of stress.^{2,4} The presence, quality, and stability of social ties can influence how supported an individual feels and how effectively they are able to navigate challenges over time.

Human Capital encompasses the personal attributes and capacities that support functioning and goal attainment, including education, skills, knowledge, self-efficacy, physical and mental health, and overall well-being.^{2,3,4} Together, these attributes contribute to an individual's ability to engage with opportunities, manage demands, and pursue personally meaningful goals within society. Though closely related, social and human capital represent distinct dimensions of recovery capital. Human capital is located within the individual and reflects personal capacities and resources. Social capital, by contrast, arises through relationships and networks and reflects access to resources beyond the individual. In practice, the two frequently interact: for example, skills and confidence (human capital) may help an individual build supportive relationships, while strong relationships (social capital) can reinforce learning, health, and self-worth.

Cultural Capital refers to the cultural norms, values, knowledge, and skills that enable individuals to navigate social institutions, meet basic needs, and act in ways that support their interests and goals.^{1,4} This includes beliefs about health, recovery, responsibility, and belonging, as well as an individual's sense of identity and meaning-making. Cultural capital is deeply intertwined with other forms of recovery capital and can influence how individuals perceive recovery, engage with services, and relate to their communities.

Research suggests that during recovery, some individuals reconnect with cultural values, roles, or identities that may have been diminished or set aside during active substance use.² At the same time, not all forms of recovery capital are inherently protective. Certain relationships, cultural norms, or financial obligations, such as substance-using peer networks, unmanageable debt, or norms that discourage help-seeking, may increase vulnerability rather than resilience. In these cases, recovery work may involve reducing the influence of risk-enhancing forms of capital and strengthening or substituting more supportive alternatives, such as cultivating pro-recovery relationships, improving financial stability, or developing cultural resources that reinforce well-being.

Key Takeaway: Because every recovery journey is unique, the configuration of recovery capital that supports stability and growth will vary across individuals and may change over time. Documenting recovery capital can provide a map of how recovery is unfolding, highlighting both shared patterns and meaningful differences across people and communities. For recovery researchers and professionals, attending to changes in recovery capital can support more responsive, person-centered care and deepen understanding of how recovery pathways emerge, evolve, and are influenced by broader social and structural conditions.



Social Capital: Social capital is the total capacity of resources that an individual has access to through their relationships and social networks, such as family, friendships, and community bonds^{2,3}. Social capital is important to recovery because it translates into access to many useful resources, including employment, housing, support in overcoming life difficulties, information, and emotional support during life transitions^{2,4}.

Economic Capital: Economic capital, also referred to as financial, encompasses factors such as income, property, savings, and other assets that can be used as money^{1,3}. Physical capital can influence the treatment an individual receives, the support services they can afford, housing stability, and the sustainability of overall lifestyle changes^{2,5}.

For example, a low level of access to physical capital could be the difference between receiving treatment and returning directly to the environment the individual was in prior to treatment. In contrast, an individual with higher levels of physical capital may be able to access higher-quality treatment options and, following treatment, move out of their previous environment—potentially out of the community or state^{2,5}.

Human Capital: Attributes such as educational achievement, self-esteem, skills, knowledge, overall health (mental and physical), status, among others, intertwine to create human capital, or the ability to thrive within modern society and reach individual goals^{2,3,4}.

It may seem as though social and human capital are the same; however, they are distinctly separate. Human capital refers to the individual, and the attributes listed above describe the building blocks of that individual. Human capital focuses on the individual, whereas social capital concerns the interactions and resources gained through relationships with others.

Cultural Capital: Cultural capital refers to the “cultural norms and the ability to act in one’s interest within those norms to meet basic needs and maximize opportunities”¹. This includes an individual’s values and beliefs, as well as their perceptions and opinions⁴.

Being mindful of cultural capital is foundational to supporting the individual as a whole, as cultural capital is deeply entangled with and influences other forms of capital. Additionally, research has documented that once an individual enters recovery, they often readopt cultural capital they had previously rejected while struggling with substance use². It is useful to remember that recovery capital is not always positive. Having harmful friends, a large amount of debt, and the wrong kind of cultural skills can do real harm. In these instances, there is work to be done to convert negative capital into positive capital (e.g., good friends, savings account, and helpful cultural assets). The lack of capital or resources may damage an individual’s recovery journey or weaken their ability to sustain it.

An individual’s substance use journey is fundamentally unique, and therefore, the recovery capital necessary to sustain recovery is as unique as the recovery pathway. Documenting recovery capital provides a map of how an individual’s recovery has evolved over time and how it is both similar to, and distinct from, that of their peers within the recovery community. Recovery researchers and professionals must be aware of how an individual’s recovery capital changes and evolves, not only to support the individual, but also to better understand how to support those who have yet to begin their recovery journey.

Key Takeaway: Recovery capital is the resources and support an individual relies on to sustain their recovery. By regularly measuring and documenting recovery capital, recovery professionals can gain valuable insights into how best to support the individual throughout their recovery journey.

**To read more on recovery capital please view the
Recovery-Iowa.org Resource Library!**





Works Cited

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