

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.

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 opinions.⁴

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 use.² 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.

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This project is supported by State Opioid Response funds through the Iowa Department of Health and Human Services, Bureau of Substance Use (IowaHHS) via a subaward from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement by, IowaHHS, SAMHSA/HHS, or the U.S. Government.

Suggested Citation:

Etten, S. M., Dorius, S. F., & Hlavacek, A. (2026). *Understanding recovery capital: A holistic framework for sustaining recovery*. Public Science Collaborative. <https://recovery-iowa.org/intro-to-recovery-capital/>