

Pathways to Mutual Support for Alcohol Use Disorder

Medications for alcohol use disorder (MAUD) support sustained abstinence or reduced drinking by decreasing cravings and diminishing the rewarding effects of alcohol. They are most effective when used in combination with behavioral therapies that support long-term recovery by enhancing engagement in treatment and improving outcomes.⁴ Clinical providers, peer support specialists, social workers, counselors and other staff have specific, complementary skills and roles as they provide care and support to patients with alcohol use disorder (AUD) and help them navigate their recovery journeys.



Defining Mutual Support

Patients often need support outside of treatment services to sustain behavior change and progress, and mutual support groups are a widely available option. *Mutual support* refers to voluntary, peer-led relationships where individuals with shared experiences, such as challenges with alcohol use, provide each other with emotional, informational and practical support. Relationships are built on empathy, mutual care and a structure where everyone has the opportunity to both give and receive assistance.

Attending mutual support group meetings while on MAUD enhances recovery outcomes. It improves treatment retention, boosts abstinence rates and reduces social isolation. In fact, research also shows that it leads to better long-term abstinence than either method alone.¹ These peer groups also strengthen coping skills and recovery identity, further complementing clinical care.²

Mutual support groups take several approaches, including 12-step programs (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous [AA]), secular options (e.g., SMART Recovery) and faith-based groups (e.g., Celebrate Recovery). Many peer-led recovery groups, including those hosted by recovery community organizations (RCOs), meet in person or virtually. The range of options helps people find connection, support and accountability in ways that align with their personal values and needs.



Stop 1: Clinician and Patient Review the Treatment Plan

Incorporating peer support and a wellness plan into treatment is one way to support a patient on their MAUD journey. A *wellness plan* is a self-directed, strengths-based tool a person uses to support their recovery. It typically includes personal goals, coping strategies, support systems and strategies for managing stress and maintaining behavior changes. Action items on a wellness plan could include growing a mutual support network or establishing daily goals. Unlike clinical treatment plans, wellness plans are holistic, nonclinical and often developed in partnership with peer support specialists, social workers and/or counselors; they reflect a person's values, strengths and vision for a meaningful life.³





Stop 2: Peer Support Specialist/Other Staff and Patient Review the Wellness Plan

A *peer support specialist* is a formalized and specialized role for people with lived or living experience of substance use and/or recovery. *Recovery capital* refers to the total internal and external resources the patient can draw from to initiate and sustain recovery from substance use disorders and it includes the personal, social, community and cultural assets that support long-term wellness. Importantly, higher levels of recovery capital are associated with better outcomes in maintaining behavior change and improving quality of life. The peer support specialist (or other staff) and the patient can assess for recovery capital while completing the wellness plan. Together, the peer support specialist and patient can co-create a goal for further developing recovery capital in the wellness plan whereas a clinician can assess for gaps in recovery capital and add a goal into the treatment plan. When discussing and assessing recovery capital with the patient, the peer support specialist will help identify resources to address areas of lower capital, including mutual support.



Stop 3a: Peer Support Specialist and Patient Discuss Mutual Supports

Peer support specialists help patients access mutual support by sharing their own experiences, reducing stigma and connecting patients with groups that fit their needs and preferences. They may attend meetings with patients for the first time, explain different types of mutual support options (e.g., 12-step, secular, faith-based), and help patients overcome barriers like fear or transportation. By building trust and offering encouragement, peer support specialists make it easier for patients using MAUD to engage in mutual support.



Stop 3b: Clinicians/Other Staff and Patient Discuss Mutual Support Meetings

If a peer support specialist is not available, clinicians and other staff, such as case managers, can also help patients explore mutual support options. They can help patients by normalizing mutual support as a valuable part of the treatment process, discussing different types of groups to match patient preferences, and addressing concerns or misconceptions. Clinicians and case managers can follow up on mutual support participation and reinforce its benefits to help patients feel more confident and motivated to stay engaged. Information on mutual support groups can be found online, through local RCOs or on various mobile apps.



Stop 4: Mutual Support Options

12-step groups are structured around spiritual principles and peer-led steps toward recovery. Examples:

- [Alcoholics Anonymous \(AA\)](#)
- [Al-Anon](#)

Secular (Nonspiritual) groups emphasize evidence-based strategies without spiritual or religious components. Examples:

- [Harm Reduction Works](#)
- [HAMS](#)
- [SMART Recovery](#) (Self-Management and Recovery Training)
- [Wellbriety](#)
- [LifeRing Secular Recovery](#)
- [Women for Sobriety](#)

Faith-based groups integrate religious or spiritual teachings into recovery. Examples:

- [Celebrate Recovery](#)
- [Recovery Alive](#)
- [Recovery Dharma](#)

Peer-run recovery centers offer drop-in, peer-led groups that are often informal and holistic. Examples:

- RCOs (a [list of RCOs](#) from the [Alliance for RCOs \(ARCO\) at Faces and Voices of Recovery](#))

Online and App-based Peer Support are accessible 24/7 and ideal for those in rural or underserved areas. Examples:

- [In The Rooms](#)
- [Sober Grid](#)
- [WEconnect](#)

For a more detailed list of recovery groups, visit [Faces and Voices of Recovery's Guide to Recovery Groups](#).



Stop 5: Overcoming Barriers to Mutual Support

Despite the many benefits, individuals taking MAUD may encounter several barriers to engaging in mutual support. These can include anxiety, stigma related to medication use, transportation challenges, limited meeting options that align with personal needs, and confusion or misinformation about mutual support. Health care professionals play a vital role in addressing these barriers by providing education, tailored referrals and support finding groups that meet the patient's unique recovery needs.



Additional Resources

- [The Role of Mutual-help Groups in Treatment](#)
An overview of how mutual-help groups support recovery and complement treatment.
- [Alcoholics Anonymous and Other 12-Step Programs for AUD: Cochrane Review](#)
Evidence that AA and 12-step facilitation improve long-term abstinence.
- [Peer-Based Addiction Recovery Support](#)
A detailed history and evaluation of mutual aid and peer support models.
- [Recovery Research Institute](#)
Evidence, summaries, tools and articles for clinicians on mutual support and recovery pathways.
- [Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America](#)
A definitive history of addiction treatment and recovery movements, including mutual aid.

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