

# Why Work Is an Important Part of Long-Term Recovery

Posted on [December 7, 2010](#) by [Addiction Treatment in Recovery](#)

For some who complete treatment and begin recovery, it's a no-brainer. They're eager to get back to work, to something familiar, an activity they know and can count on. But others aren't so fortunate. They either don't have a job to go back to or perhaps haven't had a job in quite some time. Some can't take the pressure on their return to work and are let go, only to drift about aimlessly. Having a regular job to go to is a big deal. In fact, recovery experts say that work is an important part of long-term recovery. This is true for a lot of reasons. Let's look at a few of them.

## Definition of Work

Work is variously defined as a paid job, paid employment, part of one's occupation or duties, place of employment, or any purposeful activity whether or not there is remuneration.

Work can, therefore, be an activity that a person in recovery volunteers to do. It doesn't require that the individual be paid money to qualify as work. In the sense we use work in recovery, however, it usually involves performing duties or assignments in return for a paycheck. In the event that a paid job isn't available, performing voluntary services is a good interim alternative until a regular job can be secured.

## Employment is a Pillar of Recovery

One of the sustaining components of a successful recovery, according to experts in the field, is gainful employment. In addition to two critical support networks of family and 12-step groups, work offers the individual in recovery the opportunity to continue to make progress toward realization of goals, improvement of familial and social relationships, rebuilding financial stability, and restoration of self-confidence, among many other benefits.

Effective recovery, then, almost always involves an individual having gainful employment, finding and keeping a job, and making a contribution to society through his or her efforts.

## Advantages of Work

While it's all well and good to look at work as an important part of long-term recovery in the abstract sense, it's even more practical to look at the advantages of work. In this way, it's easier to see how working assists the individual in healing post-treatment for substance abuse, dependence, or addiction – or in recovery from process addictions, substance abuse and co-occurring mental health disorders.

1. **Steady income** – There's no question that having a job to go to that you get paid for is important to bring in a steady income. Without a regular paycheck, it's not only impossible to take care of family and personal obligations, it's much harder to live independently. Just knowing that you'll get paid once a week, twice monthly, or on a per-job basis (for those who may be freelancers or contractors), is a big boost to ongoing recovery efforts. A steady income is something you can count on.

2. **Stability** – One of the things that's been lacking during your time of substance abuse is stability. The up and down, back and forth cycle of substance abuse is not conducive to stability. Just the opposite is true. When you are employed, and go to your job daily, this contributes to your overall stability. It's something

you do day in and day out. That, in itself, is a measure of stability. You know what you need to do and you do it, knowing that being employed is going to benefit you today and tomorrow in recovery.

3. Ability to take care of financial responsibilities – When you are gainfully employed, you'll have the ability to take care of your financial responsibilities – something you may have been unable to do while you were in treatment or were suffering from substance abuse or other addictive behaviors. Society expects individuals to make responsible choices and to be able to manage their financial affairs. Having and keeping a job is an indication of normalcy, of fitting in, of being part of community.

4. Ability to take care of household responsibilities – Whether you are the spouse or parent, sibling or adult child, there are household responsibilities that probably were neglected when you were in treatment or during the period when you were abusing substances. Getting back on track to resume your ability to tend to household responsibilities is aided by having a job that you go to and get paid to do.

5. Constructive use of time – There are several old sayings that are similar to the following: "Idle hands are the devil's workshop." The words may be somewhat different, but they all mean the same thing. When a person sits idle, bad things can happen. This has nothing to do with the concept of sin, but the fact that if you sit around and do nothing (for example, don't look for a job), the hours that go by will undoubtedly cause you to start thinking about your previous behavior – perhaps even spur you to use again. Having a job, on the other hand, is a constructive use of your time. While you are at your place of employment, you are responsible for carrying out certain duties and responsibilities, all of which take time – and help pass the hours in a more beneficial manner than being unemployed and idle.

6. Opportunity to enter new fields – Let's say that you've always wanted to go into the field of engineering, or catering, or start your own business. When you're in recovery, this may be just the right time to look into what it would take to pursue your dream. This may mean going back to school to get or finish a degree, or take specialized training, go into an apprenticeship, or just take some night classes to gain a skill or perfect your abilities in something like computer science. Look at this time as an opportunity to enter new fields – even if you are currently employed. In fact, receiving training or additional education while you already have a job is another constructive use of your time – and will help in your pursuit of long-term recovery goals.

7. Expand horizons – During the grip of addiction or substance abuse, it's virtually impossible to see beyond the need for the next fix, crafting and planning how to get the money to use, using, and beginning the cycle all over again. The future is limited at best, and ignored totally, at worst. But now that you're in recovery, going to work on a regular basis allows you to begin to expand your horizons. You will be able to see more possibilities ahead of you as a result of your hard work today. Doing a good job may lead to additional opportunities for advancement – in your current job or in another one, either at the same company or with a new employer.

8. Build self-confidence – The more that you apply yourself at work, the more you add to your store of self-confidence. It seems axiomatic that hard work equals reward, but the rewards are not always quickly visible. In terms of self-confidence, however, the rewards may be seen in your readiness to smile, to accept new challenges, to take on tougher assignments. When you feel that you are well-equipped to tackle new things, just doing so boosts your self-confidence. The more you do that you feel happy with, the greater your reserve of self-confidence. It's all in the doing. Do a good job, and your self-confidence will increase.

9. Restore self-esteem – One of the earliest casualties of substance abuse, addiction, and addictive behavior is a loss of self-esteem. When you're in early recovery, your emotional state is still fragile. You feel vulnerable and, in a very real sense, you are. Some in early recovery report feeling worthless, unable to make a contribution, that their months and years of addiction have left them helpless. But there's an

antidote to those feelings: work. When you go to your job and do the best you can, you begin to feel that you're doing something good, something that's right for you. This helps restore your self-esteem or, in the case that you didn't have any to begin with, to build it.

10. Pride of accomplishment – Work involves many and varied tasks, from large to small. Some work-related responsibilities require collaborating with others, participating in group meeting, while others mean working alone. But there's always a goal, a deadline, a project outline to adhere to. When you successfully complete the steps to achieve a particular assignment, task, or project, you gain a sense of pride in your accomplishment. And you deserve to feel proud of your achievements. This is an important aspect of the benefit of work in long-term recovery.

11. Self-Sufficiency – Everyone wants to be able to stand on his or her own two feet. When you're in recovery, this may seem at first to be an illusive goal. So much is undetermined. You feel uncertain which direction to take in any number of circumstances. When you have a job that you look forward to going to each day, you are asserting your intentions to re-establish your self-sufficiency. You will, day by day, gain strength in your ability to be able to take care of yourself in the manner that you wish. Even if you are still dependent on others for financial or other support (in the case of a teen still at home under the parents' roof, for example), working can help in the transition to becoming self-sufficient.

12. Responsibility – If you want people to trust you, it's necessary to show that you are responsible. Your word has to mean something, and others need to feel that they can rely on you to fulfill your responsibilities. Going to work and doing what is expected of you shows that you are capable of taking care of responsibilities. It also helps you by reasserting your belief in your own sense of responsibility. If something is important to you, if you feel that you can and should own part of the effort toward its completion, and take steps to do so, then you are demonstrating your responsibility.

13. Community – Unless you're independently wealthy, working is part of the fabric of American life. And even multimillionaires work, in one sense of the word or another. They may serve on the boards of charitable organizations, or perform duties in other philanthropic, social, political or other organizations. But for most Americans, and especially those in recovery, work brings with it a sense of being part of the community. You have co-workers and liaisons with individuals in other departments, perhaps other companies. You may interface with the general public, or with suppliers. Every person with whom you come into contact during the course of your job is another example of the community that is important to you – and can help in your efforts to maintain a successful long-term recovery.

14. Sense of wholeness – Everyone who is in recovery wants to feel whole again, to feel healed, to feel complete. Work helps to bring about this sense of wholeness, not on its own, but as part of the overall recovery plan that you've created for yourself. One thing you know is that long-term recovery doesn't occur in a vacuum. You have to actively work it every day – including going to work, seeing your doctor or counselor, going to 12-step meetings, taking care of yourself and your family.

#### Potential Work Disadvantages – and How to Overcome Them

Certainly there are some disadvantages associated with work, but these can be overcome. It may take some effort on your part – and most likely will – but the reward will be worth it.

1. No jobs available – Perhaps the biggest disadvantage about trying to get a job is when there are no jobs available. In the current economic climate, unemployment rates are at a historic high. What can you do if you can't get a job? There are some things to consider, including going back for some education, getting additional training in a field that is hiring, working for a relative or friend, taking a job with a temporary agency. Consider the lack of available jobs as a temporary thing, and don't let it get you down.

Put together a plan, talk with your 12-step sponsor, family members, and trusted advisors, and set about doing what you can so that you are ready to take advantage of an opportunity to work when it becomes available.

2. Coming back at lower pay – While you were away at treatment, many things could have changed in your workplace. It's happened to millions of Americans already who've been out of the work environment for many different reasons. Employers have had to cut back, lay off people, trim operations, cut costs. If you are able to go back to work but your pay has been cut, you're not being discriminated against, most likely. It's happening to a lot of people. What you can do: work as efficiently and diligently as you can to prove your worth. Offer to take on additional assignments – but don't overextend yourself too soon. When the economy picks up, your employer will recognize your efforts and you'll be more likely to get a raise – if anyone's getting one.

3. Being reassigned – Suppose your old job is gone, or you've been replaced by someone else in your absence? Again, the realities of the workplace are that tasks must be handled. If you're not there to take care of your duties, your employer has to put someone in the job who can. It's a business necessity. If you've been reassigned, don't complain that it's unfair and threaten to quit. That would be shortsighted and perhaps the worst thing you could do. There may not be another job so readily available. Instead, say that you will do the very best that you can in your reassignments, and you would appreciate being considered to return to your previous assignment should the opportunity present itself. You can also state that your intent is to prove to your employer how much you can contribute to the company, and want to move up when he or she feels you are ready. This shows initiative and an understanding of the business climate. Your employer will remember that you have a practical grasp of what's important at the company.

4. Working too much to make up for lost time – Treatment takes time. For some, it takes longer than others. And time is something that can weigh heavily on those who are returning to work. The feeling of needing to make up for all that lost time can be a trap. Don't fall into it. If you put in too many hours in the frantic attempt to regain the time you've lost, you're setting yourself up for frustration, exhaustion, and potential mistakes or failures. Take it easy and take it slow. Gradually increase your pace over the weeks and months following your return. This will ensure that you only tackle what you are ready to.

5. Trying to prove yourself – Another pitfall many in recovery experience is trying to prove themselves to others when they go back to work. You may feel that everyone is watching you, expecting you to make a mistake or start using again. You may try so hard to prove that you're better than you actually defeat your efforts. You could start spinning your wheels, taking on too many projects at once and not paying enough attention to any of them. Rather than proving you're back up to speed, the result may very well be that you appear scattered, unfocused, and unprepared to handle assignments. Pace yourself. Do one thing to the best of your ability at a time. Schedule projects. Ask for help. You'll gradually get back in the groove.

6. Taking work home – While it's really dangerous for those in recovery for workaholism, taking work home is a no-no for everyone in recovery. You need to clearly separate your time at work from your time at home and away from work. Overlap is not healthy for the simple reason that the tendency will be to choose one over the other. If you bring work home on a regular basis, you'll eventually be ignoring your responsibilities and involvement with your family, stop taking care of yourself, and begin to feel overworked, overburdened, unable to catch up. It's symptomatic of another vicious cycle you're all too familiar with. Simple solution: do your work at work, and don't take it home.

7. Burning out – Too much focus on work is a clear recipe for burning yourself out. There's no upside to burn-out. When you collapse from physical or mental exhaustion, or feel so frustrated and unable to keep up, your coping mechanisms are likely to be so depleted that you'll begin to think again about using. You never want to be hungry, angry, lonely, or tired (the H.A.L.T. acronym of Alcoholics Anonymous). That's when you're likely to slip. Avoid burning out by pacing yourself at work.

8. Refusing to take vacation – This is similar to the danger associated with taking work home and burning out. By refusing to take a vacation, you are setting yourself up for eventual exhaustion, frustration, and possible failure. Everyone needs time off from work – especially those who intend to be successful in long-term recovery. Vacation time doesn't need to be elaborate, long, or expensive. Even if it's only a week-end with the family doing something you all enjoy, it's a valuable use of your non-work time that you need for effective long-term recovery.

9. Sensitivity to other's reactions – It's hard to return to work after being in treatment and not feel sensitive to the reactions of your co-workers and supervisor. It's human nature to react to others' opinions. One way to deal with this is to have a private conversation with your supervisor and close co-workers. Let your boss know that you learned a lot in treatment and are committed to doing all you can to remain sober. Ask for understanding as you gradually ramp up your responsibilities and say that you will be attending regular 12-step meetings. With your close co-workers, repeat the part about learning a lot in treatment and you're better now. Tell them you're glad to be back and ready to work. Enough said. Don't go into details about treatment. That's private and not related to work. If you set the stage with upfront discussions, you should be able to regard some reactions as just normal curiosity. After all, addiction and recovery aren't familiar to everyone. It may just take some getting used to. Be yourself, do your job, help others when you can, and give it time.

10. Feeling stuck – You may have a lot of bills that you need to take care of and going back to work may lead to a feeling of being stuck. Maybe you don't like your job, dislike your supervisor, or have a feeling that you're wasting your talents and time. If you do feel stuck, take some positive steps to do something about it. Look for another job, one that you've long been interested in or one that now looks more attractive. If you need additional training or referrals or an apprenticeship to be qualified for it, find out how to get what you need, make a plan, and start taking the steps required. The only way to get over feeling stuck is to do something about it.

Bottom line: Work is an important part of long-term recovery. Recognize this, make a plan, and get back to work as soon as you can in recovery. If you don't enjoy what you do, take steps to find work that you do find meaningful. Recovery is an ongoing process. You have time to make changes in your choice of jobs. Do what you can, each and every day. Recovery is worth making the effort to find a job you truly enjoy, one that you're good at, and one that provides commensurate rewards.

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