

Online Voices for Recovery

This year marks the 20th anniversary of **National Alcohol and Drug Addiction Recovery Month (Recovery Month)**, presented by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA's) Center for Substance Abuse Treatment. Since **Recovery Month** first began 20 years ago, the media landscape has changed significantly. Digital channels are expected to contribute to 80 percent of media usage by 2020. To continue to support all those affected by substance use disorders and people in the recovery community, it is necessary to adapt to the ways people are talking about substance use disorders and long-term recovery. We need to reach the millions of Americans who are discussing addiction, treatment, and recovery on the Internet.

The evolution of the Web has created a broader range of communication about these topics. There are many different conversations occurring online about various aspects of drug use, addiction, treatment options, and recovery. These conversations are happening in many different places; blogs, message boards, forums, and social networks all contribute to parts of the dialogue.

During this year's **Recovery Month**, we are encouraging everyone to take advantage of these new channels. You can read more about using the Internet to publicize your events and how to reach out to your local community in the "**Media Outreach**" section of this toolkit on the **Recovery Month** Web site at <http://www.recoverymonth.gov>. To complement those materials, this guide provides tools and resources to help you:

- Find and organize conversations and news posted online about addiction, treatment, and recovery
- Use online resources most appropriately to inform your work in helping others with substance use disorders

Glossary of Online Terms

Blog: Short for "Web log," a blog is a user-generated Web site. If you have a computer, you can create a personalized blog where you publish updates on special topics, your personal life, and just about everything else. It often is posted by date in reverse chronological order.

Search Engine: This is a resource designed to help you find other Web sites on the Internet by scanning pages and looking for keywords. The most popular are **Google**, **Yahoo!**, and **Ask**.

Message Boards and Forums: Built around a specific issue, these online communities allow registered members to post a brief message or ask a question of people with similar interests. Users can either start their own conversations or respond to another member's comment.

Social Networks: Similar to message boards and forums, these services allow people to register and build a profile about their interests. They can then network with others in the online community based on their likes, share notes and friends, and connect to build a network of contacts. Some are very general, such as **Facebook** and **MySpace**, but there are also many more designed for specific interests. Most of the addiction and recovery conversation takes place on message boards, which offer more anonymity compared with social networks.

Searching for Voices Online

Conversations about substance use disorders, treatment, and recovery abound on the Internet. With millions of blogs already in existence and new ones being created every day, finding the right dialogue to participate in can seem like a daunting task. In addition to the many resources available at the [Recovery Month Web site](#), you can read about addiction, treatment, and recovery on blogs and message boards. Many tools will help you uncover these Web sites. The most popular are search engines, such as [Google](#), which you have likely used before, but there also are tools designed to help you locate specific conversations on blogs and message boards. You can sort your searches by what is the most relevant or arrange the conversations by date posted. Some blog search engines to try are:

- [Google BlogSearch](#), which works in the same way as the main Google search engine
- [Technorati](#), which ranks blogs by their “authority” or “popularity.” This can tell you how widely read a specific blog is by gauging how many other sites link to it. The most reputable blogs are linked to the most.

Gathering Information in One Place

When you begin searching for news, events, or discussions about addiction, treatment, and recovery support, you may read your local newspaper, other traditional outlets, a few online sites, and maybe even a blog or two. Each of these diverse resources may help keep you informed of news and opinions that affect your daily work. However, if you were trying to stay up to date on all of these sources, you would have to flip through dozens of different newspapers or Web sites each day. What if you could build one newspaper with only the articles that interest you? In a way, you can, using something called RSS, or Really Simple Syndication. It is a Web application designed specifically to make your information-gathering automatic and contained in one place – doing the heavy lifting for you so you, can spend more time reading the material instead of searching for it.



The RSS Symbol

RSS takes articles on topics that interest you and publishes them on a separate stream called a “feed,” which is updated automatically when a new article on the topic is posted. Instead of checking each Web site constantly to look for updates, you can download your personalized feed to an RSS reader. Examples of readers include:

- [FeedReader](#)
- [Google Reader](#)
- [Omea](#)

These Web sites combine streams of news from the sites you visit and put them all in one place – either in your e-mail box or on one of the password-protected sites listed above. Most sites that update content often, such as blogs and news sites, produce an RSS feed. Sites that have an RSS feed will have an orange icon with the image of a signal on it. Click it and you will be able to see the feed and download it to your RSS reader. After that, your RSS reader will have all the information you want in one place.

Using Online Resources Appropriately

As you are diving into the online world, think about what you want to get out of your research. You may find two different types of information online about substance use disorders, treatment, and recovery:

- News about people in recovery and research about addiction, treatment, and recovery. You may even find information about **Recovery Month** events in your own community.
- Firsthand accounts from people who are (or know someone who is) currently experiencing the hardship of addiction. These voices can give a realistic and honest perspective of addiction from someone experiencing the pain **right now**.

You can use this information in a number of ways:

- **Listen and learn** – Reading news articles and blogs about addiction, treatment, and recovery gives you an opportunity to hear directly from people who are affected by these issues. You will gain a lot of knowledge about their concerns by simply reading carefully. Ultimately, the best way to participate may be as a silent observer, keeping in mind the sensitivity of the issue.
- **Tailor your Recovery Month outreach** – The knowledge you can gain by following online conversations will help you tailor your outreach during **Recovery Month** and beyond. It can help you provide up-to-date, relevant resources and counsel to members of your community. For example, after you see what people are talking about today on a specific issue, you can identify trends or think about different topics to address tomorrow with your activities.

Online Support Forums and Message Boards

- **The Sober Recovery Community** – Offers support forums for people in recovery, as well as family and friends
- **The Sober Forums** – Provides message boards for people in recovery and also provides recovery coaching from professional counselors
- **Cyber Recovery Fellowship** – Offers faith-based forums for people in recovery
- **eGetGoing** – Helps people new to recovery through online support groups led by certified counselors
- **The Sober Village** – Offers online community forums for people in recovery

- **Find support** – Treatment services are sometimes offered online, which can be helpful especially when transportation or other barriers keep people from obtaining the help they need. Often, anonymous users may post messages about how their recovery is going or any struggles they have had. The message board community will respond with words of encouragement or other helpful information.

While this can be uplifting, you should be aware that the purpose of these forums is to guide those in recovery to find **another** support outlet offline. Message boards and support forums can help guide those with questions to resources that can help them. It is imperative to avoid making them a replacement for proper treatment or recovery services.

JOIN THE VOICES FOR RECOVERY

- **Connect with others, but respect their privacy** – In some cases, you may know who is writing a piece online, especially if it is on a newspaper Web site. But if it is a personal blogger or a message board, you are not necessarily going to be able to identify the writer. The online world reinforces the anonymity traditions of many mutual support groups, therefore offering an appropriate and familiar outlet for people in recovery.
- **Share your story** – Many people use the Internet to discuss substance use disorders because it is a safe and non-confrontational arena where they can openly talk about their problems.

Learning Online

As the Internet continues to evolve, new tools and resources will become available that will help you research, learn, and talk about addiction, treatment, and recovery. In your quest to provide the most appropriate information, treatments, and paths of recovery to people in your community, the open conversation of the online world will become more relevant in the future.

For the last 20 years, **Recovery Month** has focused on building resources designed to help you fulfill this goal. As new technologies develop, **Recovery Month** will continue to adjust to your needs in using these channels. In fact, in 2008, SAMHSA devoted one of its *Road to Recovery* Webcast episodes to “**Accessing Prevention, Treatment, and Recovery Online**,” which can be viewed at <http://www.recoverymonth.gov>.

Whether you are planning an event or looking to provide additional support for someone who is affected by a substance use disorder, use the resources on the **Recovery Month** Web site, <http://www.recoverymonth.gov>, as a guide. Another important resource is SAMHSA’s 24-hour national helpline for information and treatment referrals in English and Spanish, **1-800-662-HELP**.

Web sites or event examples mentioned in this document and on the *Recovery Month* Web site are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of HHS, SAMHSA, or CSAT.