

The Internet's Role in Substance Use Disorders and Recovery Support

Two decades ago, when **National Alcohol and Drug Addiction Recovery Month (Recovery Month)** first began, the world was a different place:

- The Internet had not yet emerged as a common resource for information on any topic, much less about substance use disorders.
- Barriers such as a lack of transportation in rural areas were more likely to keep people from accessing treatment services than they are today.¹
- The use of medication-assisted treatment options such as methadone, although they were available, was much more limited and less well understood.²

Today, all three of these examples are no longer the case. These changes in what we know and how we communicate about substance use disorders are the focus of this year's 20th anniversary **Recovery Month** theme, **"Join the Voices for Recovery: Together We Learn, Together We Heal."** **Recovery Month** is presented by the **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA's) Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT)**, within the **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**. This year's theme emphasizes the need to use all available resources, in our communities and on the Internet, to educate people about the disease and to help those with substance use disorders, and those close to them, get support.

This theme celebrates the power of community support and understanding. By opening a dialogue about the harmful effects of alcohol and drug addiction on families, friends, and communities, we can provide hope, healing, and better help those struggling with substance use disorders embark on a successful journey of long-term recovery.

With this in mind, this information will help you, your friends, family, and members of your community take better advantage of the resources available online. The following sections outline how the Internet can be a helpful tool, the steps you can take to use it most effectively to find support, and the challenges it presents – and what you can do to help. It also provides tips for using the Internet to promote and facilitate your **Recovery Month** activities.

The Opportunities: How the Internet Can Help People in Need

The online environment can be a positive resource. People of all ethnic groups and age levels within the United States take advantage of the more than 70 different online recovery programs and services available. The Web has provided information and referrals to licensed in-person treatment and recovery support programs, and the presence of online-based treatment and recovery is a relatively new phenomenon that is becoming more prevalent.³

JOIN THE VOICES FOR RECOVERY



**Aaron
Kucharski**

I'm a person in long-term recovery, meaning that I haven't had a drink or a drug since September 6, 2003. Recovery has given me a new life, a new direction, and has helped me to find the passions in my life that were absent before I came into recovery.

Maintaining my recovery has been a constant focus, as I find new tools and resources to help me keep the life I now enjoy. I've been able to stay involved with activities I care about, such as writing music and participating in the political process. I was recently introduced to the growing recovery advocacy movement and had the honor of working with *Faces & Voices of Recovery* for the *Recovery Voices Count* project, which works with organizations and advocates from all levels to increase awareness of the recovery community as a political constituency.

I truly believe that the resources that were made available to me should be available to anyone. Recovery housing, mutual support groups, advocacy opportunities, and drug therapy are all a part of my recovery story. I'll continue to fight to get help for those who need it most!

I have been fortunate to travel and expand my view of what recovery is all about. I know that millions of people in recovery are serving as productive members of society – they are those who have fought the barriers themselves, and are real human beings rather than just a statistic.

I encourage everyone in recovery to tell their recovery and success stories to anyone who will listen. The more we put a face and a voice on an issue, the more real it becomes to others.

Whether you seek help for yourself or someone you know through online or face-to-face resources, remember that:

- **Addiction is a disease that should be treated like any other health problem.**⁴ It can happen to anyone and affects people of all ages, races, and economic backgrounds.⁵ Some misconceptions about the disease persist; a recent survey found that 44 percent of the general public believe that people who are addicted to alcohol could stop using the substance if they had enough willpower, and 38 percent said the same about drugs. Yet the truth is that addiction is a brain disease, and just like other diseases, such as diabetes, it is treatable.^{6,7}
- **Recovery comes in many forms.**⁸ A successful recovery journey hinges on an individualized, comprehensive, and integrated approach. Some people recover on their own; others recover through treatment and/or the assistance of self-help, mutual-aid groups, or medication-assisted therapies.⁹

A holistic approach to overcoming substance use disorders uses a wide range of age-, gender-, culturally, and drug-appropriate services to help people recover physically, mentally, and spiritually.¹⁰ By working with people's unique physical, environmental, and spiritual background, along with any mental health issues surrounding their addiction to provide individualized care, we have an opportunity to improve on their success in recovery.¹¹

JOIN THE VOICES FOR RECOVERY

If you do go online for information about these topics, you will not be alone: 8 percent of all Internet users search for information related to alcohol or drug problems, and 14 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds do so – the most of any age group.¹² Interestingly, approximately five times **more** people look for information online about alcohol and drug problems than those who receive in-person specialty treatment. This indicates that the Internet can help people who are looking for information and support, but might not want to access traditional treatment and recovery support services.^{13, 14}

Online treatment services can help people in rural areas and cities who may have problems with transportation to in-person treatment services. They also change how people receive help – instead of a once-a-week counseling session, for example, people can access support at any time, which can be helpful in preventing relapses.¹⁵

Internet-based services such as an **alcohol self-scoring test** can reach people who are typically underserved by traditional programs, such as women. Additionally, reaching less-motivated populations may allow online programs to serve as a stepping stone, moving people into treatment at an earlier stage of their illness.¹⁶

Online recovery support also can:

- **Provide** anonymous support that enables people to be more open about their experiences
- **Enable** both empowerment and privacy, since people can disclose what they want, when they want, and how they want to
- **Offer** people an infinite number of targeted support options, connecting people from certain geographic locations and those with similar personal interests and careers¹⁷

The Internet also can provide peace of mind for people concerned about their friends' and family members' substance use disorders. Forty-eight percent of people seeking health information say the last time they went online for health or medical information, their search was related to someone else's situation. Almost 75 percent felt reassured that they could make appropriate health care decisions and 56 percent felt relieved or comforted based on what they found online.¹⁸

Read on to learn how to find support for your needs online.

MYTH: Internet-based counseling is not effective.

FACT: Research suggests that treatment satisfaction is the same whether treatment is provided via Internet-based counseling or through on-site group counseling. In fact, some people prefer Internet-based services because of convenience and increased confidentiality.

SOURCE: King, et al. "Assessing the effectiveness of an Internet-based video-conferencing platform for delivering intensified substance abuse counseling." *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*, September 2008, e-publication.

How to Use the Internet to Get Help

Your first step is to research the resources, providers, and services that are available online. Ask yourself the following questions before jumping into a particular online community or recommending it to others:

- **What kind of information is required to join the community?** Many Web sites require some personal information, such as names and e-mail addresses, to participate. Review their privacy policy to ensure that the information is not distributed to third parties. The anonymity of the Internet is important for many in recovery.
- **Can I see my loved one or myself fitting in?** Take some time first to read what others are saying on the Web site before taking action. Can you relate to the other participants? Can you see yourself or a loved one feeling comfortable with the response and support they will get from others in the group? Are the posted comments constructive, supportive, and helpful?
- **What kind of oversight does the group have?** Are there licensed treatment and recovery counselors who actively oversee the conversation and participate? Does the group have moderators who ensure that privacy and anonymity are preserved and the conversation sticks to the topics at hand?
- **Does the Web site offer additional, offline resources?** Some sites offer helplines or other resources where you can interact with people offline as well, which may be important for your needs.

MYTH: The Internet can help everyone in need of treatment and recovery services overcome their addictions.

FACT: Everyone is different, which means that everyone requires individualized treatment and recovery support. Although online support programs may be an important part of helping one person on a path of recovery, someone else might need more intensive in-person treatment.

SOURCE: *National Summit on Recovery Conference Report*, pp. 5, 7-9.

Some examples of online resources include:

- SAMHSA's "Find Substance Abuse and Mental Health Treatment" Web site – Lists a range of resources about mental health, substance abuse, and treatment
- SAMHSA's "Accessing Prevention, Treatment, and Recovery Online" Webcast – Examines how technology has revamped the field of substance use disorder prevention and addiction treatment
- The Sober Recovery Community – Offers support forums for people in recovery, as well as family and friends
- Sober.com – Provides message boards for people in recovery and also provides recovery coaching from professional counselors

JOIN THE VOICES FOR RECOVERY

- [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
- [Shouting Inside](#) – Helps young adults who misuse substances share their stories and their struggles with like-minded people.

Another important resource, in addition to online recovery forums, is SAMHSA's National Helpline at **1-800-662-HELP** for toll-free information and treatment referrals in English and Spanish, 24 hours a day. As you explore these resources, remember that the Internet can present certain challenges, which are outlined in the next section.

How the Online World Can Promote Substance Use

The Internet has a wealth of positive resources to help people find treatment and recovery services, but it also provides information and resources for destructive behaviors. Unfortunately, people use the Internet to share new trends and methods of substance use, as well as to obtain drugs:

- More than half of teens believe that prescription drugs are easier to obtain than illicit drugs and that pain relievers are “available everywhere” – and in fact, many people use the Internet to obtain prescription drugs.¹⁹
- In 2007, almost 3 million people were addicted to legal substances that could be readily purchased online, including prescription pain relievers, tranquilizers, stimulants, and sedatives.²⁰

In 2008, the [National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University](#) (CASA) identified 365 Web sites that either advertised or offered controlled prescription drugs for sale online. In particular:

- Only two were registered Internet pharmacy practice sites.
- 85 percent of those that offered drugs for sale required no prescription from a physician.
- Of those that did require a prescription, half only asked that the prescription be faxed, increasing the chance of fraud and multiple use of the same prescription.²¹

The Internet also can be an educational tool to promote harmful actions. Videos and other online resources draw particular attention to how to misuse over-the-counter (OTC) medicines. In 2006, about 3.1 million people aged 12 to 25 (or 5.3 percent of the population) said they had used OTC cough and cold medications to get high during their lifetimes, and nearly 1 million (1.7 percent) had done so in the past year.²² At the same time, people use social networking sites, such as [MySpace](#), [YouTube](#), [LiveJournal](#), and [Facebook](#) to post detailed instructions, conversations, and videos of youths misusing cough medicine. Through these outlets and others, people can compare notes about misusing medicines that are legally available.²³

The same is true with *salvia divinorum*, regarded as the world's most hallucinogenic herb. About 1.8 million people aged 12 or older have used *salvia* in their lifetimes, and approximately 750,000 did so in the past year. While many may never have heard of *salvia*, this mind-altering herb is sold legally online, and more than 5,000 videos posted on YouTube show the experiences of people who have used the herb. Some of these videos have been viewed half a million times.^{24, 25}

If you suspect that someone you know has a problem with alcohol and/or drugs, talk with that person about any online habits. If you share a computer, look at your Web browser's history to find out if the sites visited include ideas about how to obtain or misuse various substances. If you don't, still raise the subject and encourage people to be open with you about their experiences. Do your part to get them the positive help they need – and as you will learn in the next section, use the Internet to draw attention to this issue during **Recovery Month**.

Using the Internet to Promote **Recovery Month**

The Internet can be an excellent tool to help you promote **Recovery Month**. Every September, **Recovery Month** encourages communities nationwide to support people with substance use disorders and celebrate those in recovery, their families and others who support them, and their treatment providers. To join the cause this year for the 20th anniversary celebration:

- **Promote the **Recovery Month** Web site** – When posting on online support forums, add a link to the **Recovery Month** Web site at <http://www.recoverymonth.gov> to your electronic "signature" to refer people to the extensive resources available.
- **Create your own Web site** – Create your own recovery-oriented Web site that discusses your experience with addiction and recovery. **Recovery Month's** Web site at <http://www.recoverymonth.gov> has a large amount of interactive content including events, stories of recovery, and multimedia products such as Webcasts and public service announcements – so link to it from your site.
- **Use the Internet to find ways to connect with others in person** – Investigate sites such as **Meetup**, which offers ways to identify others with similar interests and then arrange for offline meetings. Use **Meetup** to plan a meeting or event during **Recovery Month** for people in your online support group, should members wish to meet fellow participants.
- **Continue to learn** – Refer to the "Online Voices for Recovery" document in this toolkit for more ideas on how to learn more about real stories of addiction, treatment, and recovery on the Web.

For more information and organizations that can help provide treatment and other resources, visit the **Recovery Month** Web site at <http://www.recoverymonth.gov>. Information on treatment options in your area and the special services available can be found at SAMHSA's "Find Substance Abuse and Mental Health Treatment" Web site, a portal that includes a searchable database of more than 11,000 U.S. treatment facilities and additional treatment resources. For additional **Recovery Month** materials, visit <http://www.recoverymonth.gov> or call 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 the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment.

SOURCES

- 1 Torres, I., et al. "Accessing Prevention, Treatment, and Recovery Online." Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, *Road to Recovery* Webcast Series, August 6, 2008.
- 2 *Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series 40: Clinical Guidelines for the Use of Buprenorphine in the Treatment of Opioid Addiction*. DHHS Publication No. [SMA] 04-3939. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2004, section entitled "Introduction: Historical context."
- 3 Hall, Margery J., Ph.D. and Tidwell, Wendell C., B.S. "Internet recovery for substance abuse and alcoholism: an exploratory study of service users." *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*, Volume 24, Issue 2, March 2003, pp. 161-167.
- 4 *Pathways of Addiction: Opportunities in Drug Abuse Research*. National Academy Press. Washington, D.C.: Institute of Medicine, 1996.
- 5 *Results From the 2007 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings*. DHHS Publication No. [SMA] 08-4343. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Office of Applied Studies, September 2008, pp. 71, 73.
- 6 *Summary Report: CARAVAN@ Survey for SAMHSA on Addictions and Recovery*. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Office of Communications, 2008, pp. 2, 12.
- 7 *Myths About Drug Abuse & Treatment*, The Partnership for Drug-Free America Web site: http://www.drugfree.org/Intervention/WhereStart/13_Myths_About_Drug_Abuse. Accessed December 2, 2008.
- 8 Venner, K.L., Matzger, H., Forcehimes, A.A., Moos, R.H., Feldstein, S.W., Willenbring, M.L. et al. "Course of recovery from alcoholism." *Alcoholism, Clinical and Experimental Research*, 30, 2006, pp. 1079-1090.
- 9 *National Summit on Recovery Conference Report*. DHHS Publication No. [SMA] 07-4276. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, September 2007, pp. 5, 7-9.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Fox, Susannah. *Online Health Searches 2006*. Pew Internet and American Life Project, October 29, 2006, pp. i, 4.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 *Results From the 2007 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings*, p. 77.
- 15 Torres, I., et al. "Accessing Prevention, Treatment, and Recovery Online." *Road to Recovery* Webcast Series, August 6, 2008.
- 16 Huang et al. "Comparison of Alcohol Abusers Who Seek Traditional Treatment Versus Those Who Use An Online Program." *American Medical Informatics Association's Annual Symposium Proceedings*, 2006, p. 956.
- 17 *Using the Internet for drug abuse prevention*. New York: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2003, p. 11.
- 18 Fox, Susannah. *Online Health Searches 2006*. Pew Internet and American Life Project, October 29, 2006, pp. iii, 5.
- 19 *Partnership Attitude Tracking Study (PATS): Teens in grades 7 through 12*. Partnership for a Drug-Free America, May 16, 2006, p. 20.
- 20 *Results From the 2007 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings*, pp. 71, 73.
- 21 *You've Got Drugs! Prescription Drug Pushers on the Internet*. National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, July 2008, pp. 1, 2.
- 22 *The NSDUH Report: Misuse of Over-the-Counter Cough and Cold Medications Among Persons Aged 12 to 25*. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Office of Applied Studies, January 10, 2008, p. 1.
- 23 "Learn About Cough Medicine Abuse." Five Moms: Stopping Cough Medicine Abuse Web site: <http://www.fivemoms.com/learn-about-cough-medicine-abuse>. Accessed September 18, 2008.
- 24 *The NSDUH Report: Use of Specific Hallucinogens: 2006*. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Office of Applied Studies, February 14, 2008, p. 2.
- 25 Sack, K., McDonald, B. "Hallucinogen's Popularity May Thwart Medical Use." *The New York Times*, September 9, 2008.