Dear Alice,

Do you know how many people recover from alcohol and drug abuse annually? I would really like to know.

Thanks,
Stat-man

Answer

Dear Stat-man,

You're in good company wondering how many people recover from alcohol and drug abuse annually. Researchers have dedicated (and continue to dedicate) plenty of time and effort to researching just that. Because recovery can look different to everyone engaging in it, rates of recovery can be difficult to measure, which makes your question a challenging one to answer. Additionally, for many, the process of recovering may take years or a lifetime, rather than ever reaching a point of feeling truly recovered. Keep reading to dig into the different measures of treatment and what may affect someone's recovery.

A good place to start to tease out an answer is with some definitions and distinctions. The American Psychiatric Association (APA) defines a substance use disorder as one in which the use of alcohol or other drugs causes major impairments in a person’s life, such as having major impacts on their health, their work and home life, and being able to meet their responsibilities. It's diagnosed through a number of criteria, which include assessing the evidence that there is of risky use, whether or not their control is impaired, whether or not there are social impairments, and other pharmacological criteria. Within substance use disorder, they are broken down further into different types, such as alcohol use, tobacco use, stimulant use, and opioid use, just to name a few. Rather than being defined as abuse or dependence, the disorder can be categorized as mild, moderate, or severe, which is determined based on the diagnostic criteria that person happens to meet.

According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health [2], about eleven percent of individuals in need of treatment in a specialized facility for a substance use or dependency concern actually
received it in 2013. It's worth noting that this doesn't necessarily mean that these individuals fully recovered from drug or alcohol dependency, but rather that they participated in a treatment plan. In contrast, in the same year, over 95 percent of those who needed specific substance abuse treatment didn't receive treatment and didn't believe that they needed it. According to the APA, the highest rate of treatment completion is in a hospital residential center while the lowest rates of completion are typically found in less-structured treatment settings. Those with the highest rates of treatment completion are over age 40, have twelve or more years of education, and use alcohol rather than other substances. Also keep in mind that while people may participate in these programs, relapse, in which people use the substance again after going through a recovery process, is common (ranging from 40 to 60 percent) and for many, recovery is a lifelong process.

An individual's motivations to seek and follow through with treatment for substance abuse play a major role in their recovery. Some individuals treat themselves, stopping substance use because of a family crisis or health problem that they tie directly to their substance use. Others find professional help from psychotherapists, treatment centers, support groups, or a combination of these and other options. In fact, there are over 115,000 Alcoholics Anonymous groups with more than two million members worldwide! The level of social support from relatives, friends, and colleagues may influence an individual's recovery as well. Even with strong motivation, psychological and physical substance dependence — as well as environmental factors such as social pressures to use — are powerful forces that may work against recovery. Sociocultural factors, such as race, education, and religion, may also influence substance use, abuse, the desire to seek treatment, and recovery rates.

Though this response may generate more questions that go beyond the statistics, here's hoping that it's still helpful in providing clarity about what recovery from substance abuse looks like and in what ways people seek and receive treatment. If you or someone you know is struggling with substance use, you can check out the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA) for more information about resources, treatment, and support.

Alice!

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