Every Step Counts: Honoring Recovery in All Its Forms

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For a child, reaching a milestone is a sign of their development. For a student, receiving a diploma marks the culmination of a significant stage in their life. Parents and educators are acquainted with these pivotal moments. They witness them, celebrate them, and preserve them. Many of life's milestones are remembered through tangible items: a child's first tooth, a marathon medal, a photo, a certificate, a small keepsake. Each item tells a story. These objects anchor us to our growth and remind us of what we've endured and achieved, treasured reminders of progress and resilience.

In the field of addiction recovery, sobriety coins have long served a similar purpose. They are a small but powerful recognition of the challenges faced and overcome, symbols that quietly honor the courage required to begin again and continue forward.

As an addiction medicine provider (LCR), I have been privileged to be part of many patients' recovery journeys. I witness the courage it takes to return each week, despite trauma, stigma, and instability. I've had patients say, "Can I come every week? Showing up helps," and they keep on showing up, again and again. Their persistence, vulnerability, and openness are a testament to how deeply personal and nonlinear their recovery is. This has allowed me to better appreciate each patient's unique path—a path defined not only by setbacks but by small victories, moments of clarity, and acts of self-compassion that are often invisible to the outside world.

Mutual help organizations provide a regular structure to daily living, along with a supportive community.[1] The coins distributed at meetings become personal badges of honor. While many patients benefit from the solidarity, accountability, and encouragement provided in this setting, not all feel safe or ready to participate. Some share sentiments like: "Socializing is stressful right now," "Groups are emotionally triggering," "I'm an introvert and feel drained after the meetings," or, "I'm not ready to share my story with others." These reflections revealed an important truth: the traditional group-based approach, while transformative for many, is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Recovery looks different for everyone. For some individuals, the sense of community offered in these spaces is not accessible or helpful at certain stages of their healing, and honoring that difference is essential.

That realization sparked a question: How can we honor the milestones of those pursuing recovery outside of mutual help groups and 12-step programs? How do we make sure their progress is seen, validated, and celebrated, even if their path does not include the structure of group meetings?

This question led to a simple yet meaningful initiative: the introduction of wooden recovery coins into the outpatient practice. Wood is a symbol of strength and represents growth, grounding, and connection to the earth. Each wooden coin marks a specific month in the patient's recovery journey, whether it's one week or one year. In the clinic, when a patient achieves a milestone, we dig through our cloth bag of coins to find the right one. We hand them the coin, accompanied by words of encouragement and supported by objective evidence of their progress. We don't imply that one setback erases the journey; instead, we emphasize that progress is cumulative. Many ultimately "fall off the wagon," but we choose to celebrate what's going right and take pride in those steps together.

From the beginning, patients responded to this unexpected gesture with deep appreciation. It strengthened the bond between them and the recovery team while boosting their motivation and morale. The coins, though simple, seem to say: *we see you, and we care*. They become a tangible reminder that someone believes in them—even on the days they struggle to believe in themselves.

Research consistently supports the combination of behavioral and pharmacological interventions as the most effective approach for treating substance use disorders. A 2020 Cochrane review found that 12-step interventions can be as effective and more cost-effective than professionally delivered behavioral therapies.[2,3] As healthcare providers, advocating for accessible and individualized resources may be one of the most meaningful ways we can support recovery. The best treatment is always the one that meets a patient where they are.[1] That might be pharmacological management. It might be trauma-focused therapy. It might be harm reduction. And sometimes, it is a small, unassuming wooden coin placed in the right hands at the right moment.

The coins became part of a combined approach in our clinic, serving as a tangible recognition of progress, tailored to each patient's path and pace. Whether a patient has years of sobriety or is trying again for the first time in months, we want them to know: we're still here, still rooting for them as members of their fan club. Because no matter how recovery unfolds, every step forward deserves to be seen, honored, and remembered.

References

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Disclosures

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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