



## Commentary

### Commentary on Restaurant Workers' Substance Use Recovery: A Highlight on Sobriety and Addiction Recovery Stigmatization

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#### Abstract

This commentary is on Personal Reflection on Restaurant Workers' Substance Use Recovery: A Narrative Inquiry published by Hines and Green. The commentary addresses some of the issues in the authors' study and particularly highlight and explain the challenge faced with obtaining a larger sample to fully assess the impact of restaurant work environment on restaurant workers' substance use recovery. In that article, the authors briefly mention addiction sobriety and recovery stigmatization as a barrier but do not elaborate on the role stigmatization plays on sobriety and substance use recovery. This commentary sheds light on the barrier sobriety and addiction stigmatization presents to substance use and addiction recovery in the restaurant work environment.

**Keywords:** Addiction recovery; Restaurant workers; Sobriety; Substance use recovery

#### Introduction

Restaurant industry workers include bartenders, sommeliers, waiters, hosts, cooks and managers. Restaurant workers are the face of the restaurant and ensure to the successful operation of the restaurant [1]. Their primary duties include cooking, taking orders, serving food and drinks (including ones containing alcohol), maintaining customer service, and ensuring that all restaurant patrons have a good experience on their visit. Job duties for sommeliers and some bartenders, for example, include testing and presenting best tasting drinks and

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wine to customers and helping them understand the differences in the drinks presented. This job duty inevitably requires these employees to taste, pour and smell these drinks [2]. To perform this job duty, these employees also cannot escape staying around physical alcohol bottles and hearing the sounds of the drinks they pour into customers' glasses [3]. They are constantly faced with alcohol and exchange patrons' hands with this substance throughout their work shift. Recovering addicts often are advised to distance themselves from the substance from which they are recovering. This is, however, not possible for restaurant workers who make a living tasting and serving alcohol throughout their work shift [4]. Although substance addiction has varying reasons for different addicts, employees in the restaurant industry have consistently pointed to the high stress in the restaurant industry as a contributing factor for drinking excessively [5]. In a fast-paced work environment where employees often work long hours, odd and unstructured schedules, move around for most of their work shift, resolve patron issues, and receive low wages, stress is almost inescapable [2]. For recovering addicts who are restaurant workers, this is undoubtedly an unfavorable position to find oneself.

#### Restaurant Industry and Substance Use Recovery

Individuals recovering from any addictive substance work hard to remain focused on their recovery goals [4]. Depending on several factors including the addictive substance and duration of addiction, certain life skills may be needed to obtain recovery success. Some of these life skills include self-awareness, communication, resilience and interpersonal abilities. These life skills are directly related to successful substance use recovery because recovering addicts often depend on their support base to remain focused on their recovery goals and continuously abstain from the addictive substance [6]. This support may come through immediate and extended family members, co-workers, and other addiction support groups such as Sobriety Treatment and Recovery Teams (START) [6]. While most addiction support groups are well-grounded in addiction recovery strategies through structured daily routines offering social and emotional assistance, other sources of support like those from co-workers in the restaurant industry may not be so helpful. Alcohol is a constant readily available substance in the restaurant workspace. In the restaurant industry, employees depend on each other for support throughout their work shift often by sneaking alcohol to each other, and especially during their regular drinking culture of bonding [2,3]. It is well established in the restaurant industry for co-workers to regularly engage in a drinking culture of bonding as a form of support for each other [3]. While this form of drinking culture of bonding may be helpful to relieving the high stress associated with the restaurant work demands, it is impeding to recovering addicts' sobriety and recovery pursuits [7]. In Hines and Green's [1] study on restaurant workers sobriety and recovery while on the job, respondents expressed that although they longed to participate in their usual drinking culture of bonding with their co-workers, they had to be intentional about reminding themselves to abstain from the alcohol from which they were recovering [1]. This finding also supports the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration's report on the restaurant industry having the highest rates of substance

use disorders and the third-highest rates of heavy alcohol use among other employment sectors [7].

## Addiction Recovery Stigmatization

In Hines and Green's [1] study on restaurant workers' substance use recovery, the authors reported being able to obtain a very small sample size of two despite their persistent recruitment endeavors. The authors point to sobriety and addiction recovery stigmatization as their barrier to obtaining a larger sample. This section explains addiction stigmatization as a barrier to substance use sobriety and recovery. The mental health field openly acknowledges dealing with substance use crises [4]. While professional organizations recognize that alcohol usage in the workplace presents unsafe work conditions, recovering addicts continue to experience stigmatization from coworkers and managers. Elliot and Shelley [8] indicate that employees are fearful of being labeled as incompetent if they report their alcohol use and recovery efforts to work superiors. Disclosing one's recovery from substance addiction is as risky as disclosing one's use of an addictive substance. In the workplace, disclosing one's substance recovery could even cost employees their job. Burns and colleagues [9] report that the fear of addiction recovery disclosure is due to addiction recovery stigmatization by coworkers. This finding is supported by Reynolds and colleagues [10] whose study participants all agreed to being stigmatized for their alcohol use and recovery efforts at the workplace.

In the restaurant work industry, this stigma could be intensified to affect employees' personal relationships especially during the times the recovering addict withdraws their involvement from their usual drinking culture of bonding [1]. As suggested by its name, this is the restaurant industry's established culture of bonding for coworkers. Hines and Green [1] found from their study of restaurant workers that while the restaurant work environment itself did not significantly affect a recovering addict's quest to remain sober and focus on recovery efforts, the lack of participation in the usual drinking culture of bonding was of greater concern to participants. Restaurant workers desire to engage with their coworkers and participant in bonding activities at the workplace but for a recovering addict, the inability to consume alcohol like the rest of the coworkers presents a challenge. Addiction stigmatization also affects an addict's emotional, social and mental health [11]. Individuals who are recovering from substance use often must navigate stigma-related issues like low self-esteem, difficulties with social relationships, dashed hope of recovery from addiction and difficulties at work [11]. For the restaurant worker, this could potentially mean loss of employment which ultimately may lead to financial issues. It is no surprise, therefore, for addiction recovery researchers to struggle with participant recruitment for a study that requires recovering addicts to discuss their recovery efforts and journey with strangers. Addiction recovery researchers must work harder to gain the trust of recovering addicts.

## Conclusion

This commentary provides clarity on the role sobriety and addiction stigmatization plays in restaurant workers sobriety and addiction recovery. Ultimately, this commentary contributes to a broader literature reviewing addiction recovering and workplace stigmatization. Addiction recovery stigmatization plays a significant role in sobriety and addiction recovery and affects a recovering addict in different areas of their life including socially, emotionally, and mentally. For the restaurant worker who is recovering from substance addiction, their inability to participate in their usual drinking culture of bonding could catapult further into other issues such as difficulties at work and loss of employment. To avoid experiencing addiction recovery stigma, recovering addicts would rather not discuss their intent and/or desire to recover from their addictive substance. This can be detrimental to addiction recovery endeavors.

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